10¢

NOVEMBER

RANGELAND ROMANCES

POPULAR PUBLICATION

TRAIL OF LAWLESS HEARTS

ROMANTIC NOVEL OF THE GLAMOROUS WEST

by ROBERT DALE DENVER

LLOYD ERIC REEVE
ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY
STELLA SPENCER
ART LAWSON
NORRELL GREGORY

NOVEMBER RANGELAND ROMANCES 10¢

"Hi there, PIMPLY FACE!"

But soon . . . they changed this ugly nickname

TOM, I'VE BROUGHT YOU SOME FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST CAKES. PLEASE DO GIVE THEM—AND YOUR SKIN—A CHANCE!
OH, AW RIGHT, SIS— ANYTHING TO MAKE YOU QUIT NAGGING ABOUT IT!

TWO WEEKS LATER
FOR THE LOVE O' MIKE—IF IT ISN'T OLD PIMPLY FACE— IN DISGUISE!
SURE AS I'M BORN— WHAT HAPPENED?? HAVE TO START CALLING YOU "HANDSOME" NOW!

Don't let adolescent pimples brand YOU with a hated nickname!

Between the ages of 13 and 25, important glands develop. This causes disturbances throughout the body. Waste poisons get into the blood and irritate the skin, making it break out in pimples.

But you can clear these skin irritants out of your blood—with Fleischmann's Yeast. Then the pimples disappear!

Eat 3 cakes a day, before meals, until your skin is entirely clear. Start today!

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—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

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for TEA and COFFEE ROUTES

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IF YOU want to make money you can start right out on a fine-paying Tea and Coffee Route of your own. My sensational new starting plan produces big profits at once—up to $60.00 in a single week for full time, and up to $6.50 in a day for spare time. The business is pleasant, you set your own hours, and the opportunity for making big money is really exceptional.

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You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

MAKE MONEY FAST!

Look in the box on the right. See how fast these men and women made money. They used this same plan that I will now send you. You read it; then if you see the possibilities, I'll help you start without asking you to risk a penny of your own money.

ALBERT MILLS, Route Manager
7671 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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To encourage prompt service to ZANOL customers, I give Ford Cars to producers as a bonus over and above their regular cash profits. This same opportunity to get a brand-new Ford Car is offered to you the moment you start. The car becomes your personal property with no strings attached.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Tea and Coffee Route Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to service your route to make money every week. The way I plan it for you, you give only 5 days a week to your route, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I give you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds who needed money.

FREE WITHOUT OBLIGATION

Don't send me a cent. Just rush me your name and address on the Free Offer Coupon printed below. I will mail you all the facts Free, and even prepay the postage. Then you can decide for yourself. There is no charge for these plans now or at any other time and you positively will not be obligated to go ahead unless you see big possibilities for money making, fast. Send me your name on the coupon or a penny postcard. By this time next week you can be on your way to big money. Don't waste a minute—send this coupon at once.

Positive Proof

of Big-Money Possibilities

Can you make money with a Tea and Coffee Route? Yes. Here's a way to make it, FAST! If only three or four people had made money at fast as this, you might call it an accident. But scores have done it! Here are only a few—if space permitted I could print HUNDREDS of exceptional earnings. Wouldn't money like this give you a thrill? Cash every week to spend—more where that came from—ample money for the necessities of life and still some left over for the luxuries.

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F. J. Mosher, Wyo.	$ 60.00
Wilbur W. Whitcome, Ohio..	146.00
Tom Noble, Mich.	68.40
Clare C. Wellman, N. J.	86.00
Paul T. Krider, Pa.	81.00
Geo. W. Wright, Maine	63.75
A. Pardini, Calif.	69.09
Norman Geisler, Mich.	129.00
Albert Becker, Mich.	100.00
Gunson R. Wood, N. Y.	65.00
Lamar C. Cooper, Mich.	90.00
*Helen V. Woolmington, Pa.	45.00
*Ruby Hannen, W. Va.	73.00
Hans Ceordes, Neb.	96.40
Lambert Wilson, Mich.	79.00
W. J. Way, Kan.	78.15

These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer. Don't let this opportunity pass—send me your name today for FREE Plans.

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Send No Money—Plans Are Free

Albert Mills, Route Manager
7671 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio

With the understanding that your plans for operating my own Tea and Coffee Route will not cost me anything or obligate me in any way, send me the facts about your Route System, showing exactly how I can get started at once making up to $60 in a 5-Day-Week without risking a penny of my own money.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

*LADIES WANTED, TOO!

Many ladies have had unusually good success with Tea and Coffee Routes. They say that it is possible to make as much as the men do—up to $10 in a day and more for full time, and as high as $6.50 in a day for spare time. Don't hesitate because you are a woman. Send for this information. I will be glad to send it to you free.

RANGELAND ROMANCES

Volume Two **NOVEMBER, 1935** **Number Two**

A Novel of Old West Romance

TRAIL OF LAWLESS HEARTS.....**By Robert Dale Denver** **12**

Could Rita Quest bait a death trap for her lover—even though she believed that the lives and happiness of a hundred brave men and women depended on his capture!

Two Novelettes of Western Romance

DANCEHALL DARLING.....**By Art Lawson** **52**

She was a dancehall queen in a cheap honkatonk. And her tinhorn boss was rigging a sure fire deadfall for the man she'd sworn to kill—and desperately loved!

WILDERNESS SWEETHEARTS.....**By Norell Gregory** **82**

When all the camp was up in arms against the man she loved, Hope Adair rode in the moonlight to bring him breathless warning of her father's angry guns.

Rangeland Love Stories

LOVE LAUGHS AT DANGER.....**By Lloyd Eric Reeve** **42**

Her heart chose a drifter; a man whose only security was in his reckless love.

HER BROTHER'S KEEPER.....**By Stella Spencer** **72**

Patsy Jordan's only ally was a stranger—who, men said, had shot her brother.

HOMESTEAD GIRL.....**By Robert E. Mahaffay** **98**

She was the kind of girl who would finish the grim gun-chore her husband had failed to do!

Rangeland Romances Features

GIRL OF THE FEUD TRAILS.....**Range Rider** **10**

Polly Wentworth loved too well the man who was her family's enemy!

FRONTIER FROLICS.....**Myrtle Juliette Corey** **107**

All the neighbors helped build the young folks' home in old Frontier days.

THE PONY EXPRESS.....**Rangeland Romances Readers** **109**

The Pony Express is making new friends all over the world.

THE OPEN ROAD.....**A Department** **111**

The girls of the West knew how to carry on when their men-folk were away.

Cover by Tom Lovell

Story Illustrations by Don Hewitt and Hamilton Greene

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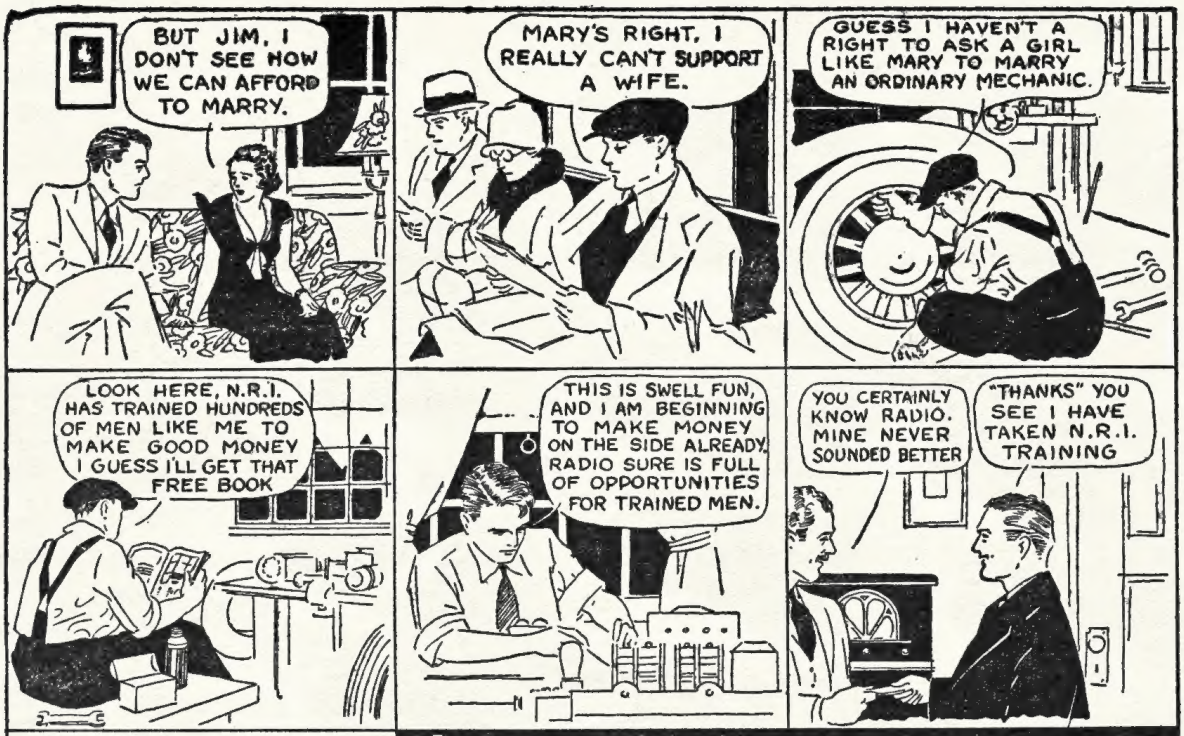
BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY.
MARY'S RIGHT, I REALLY CAN'T SUPPORT A WIFE.
GUESS I HAVEN'T A RIGHT TO ASK A GIRL LIKE MARY TO MARRY AN ORDINARY MECHANIC.
LOOK HERE, N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
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"THANKS" YOU SEE I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING
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YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN THIS RADIO FIELD.

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MANY RADIO EXPERTS MAKE $30, $50, $75 A WEEK

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MANY MAKE $5, $10, $15 A WEEK EXTRA IN SPARE TIME WHILE LEARNING

Hold your job. I'll not only train you in a few hours of your spare time a week, but the day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which quickly show you how to do Radio repair jobs common in most every neighborhood. I give you Radio Equipment for conducting experiments and making tests that teach you to build and service practically every type of receiving set made. James R. Ritz, 3525 Chapline Street, Wheeling, W.Va., writes: "During my training, my spare time earnings netted me an average of $1,000 to $1,500 yearly."

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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CITY..... STATE.....

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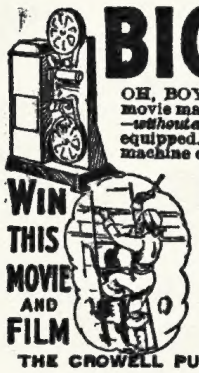

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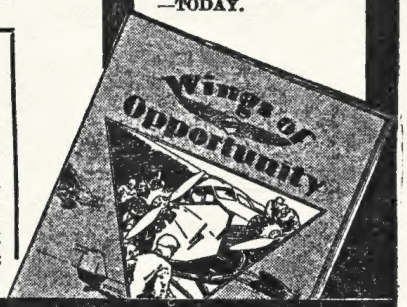

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MORE PONY EXPRESS

(The regular Pony Express Department will be found on page 109)

LETTERS are piling in from everywhere! This month we had a few more than we could print in the space allotted to the department, so, in order to satisfy as many letter-hungry readers as possible, we're publishing these in the "annex."

Here we go, Gang!

Dear Editor, Staff, one and all:

You may enter this in The Pony Express, (of which I would be right powerful glad), throw it into the waste basket after the first glance or read it all the way through. But no matter what you may do with it I'll always feel the same about *Rangeland Romances.*

To me it is a mighty fine magazine, the best our little American dime can get, and it would still remain thus, over the fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five cent magazines of the west, one can find on a fine thrifty magazine display counter, for I have read many, and although I am no decider of any great authority I feel *Rangeland Romances* has them all beat. As I said, I've read many, as writers must if they want to write for that choice they feel they can write best. I would be proud to sell to any of the western mags, but more so to R. R. For what author or authoress would not be happy to have their name on one side of the sheet at the top of the page and resting on the other the title of their brainchild. Instead of both pages yelling the title. Perhaps, someday when my luck turns I'll proudly see my name and story name on R. R.'s pages.

Hoping, I remain,

Sincerely,

Florence J. Wilcynski.

Meet a real pal.

Dear Sirs:

I became acquainted with the "different" Western Magazine a few days ago and it is Aces with me. I assure you that I shall look forward to it from now on.

I particularly like your Pony Express Department, and hope that I might "rush in" on the gang before space becomes really valuable. I would like to hear from anyone—anywhere. I am in the mid-twenties—an accountant—six feet and over, weighing one hundred seventy pounds. I am interested in most everything—and have traveled considerably. I assure your host of readers long and interesting letters—given half a chance. Come on, you boys and gals, everywhere, meet a real pal!

With every good wish for your success with your newest publication, I am,

Sincerely and truly yours,

Ray Warner, Box 27, Fort Eustic, Va.

(Please turn to page 8)

Skinny? New "7-Power" Yeast adds 5 to 15 lbs. —*in just a few weeks!*

Richest imported cultured ale yeast now concentrated 7 times with 3 kinds of iron in pleasant tablets

AN AMAZING new "7-power" yeast discovery is putting pounds of solid, normally attractive flesh on thousands of "skinny," run-down men and women who never could seem to gain an ounce before.

Gets at real cause

Doctors now know that the real reason why great numbers of people find it hard to gain weight is that they don't get enough Vitamin B and iron in their daily food. Now scientists have discovered that the richest known source of health-building Vitamin B is *cultured ale yeast.* By a new process the finest imported cultured ale yeast is now concentrated 7 times, making it *7 times more powerful.* Then it is combined with 3 kinds of blood-strengthening iron in pleasant little tablets called Ironized Yeast tablets.

If you, too, are one of the many who need these vital health-building elements, get these new "7-power" Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist at once. Day after day, as you take them, watch flat chest develop and skinny limbs round out to normal attractiveness. Indigestion and constipation from the same source quickly vanish, skin clears to natural beauty —you're an entirely new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and run-down you may be, try this wonderful new "7-power" Ironized Yeast for just a few short weeks. If you're not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money will be instantly and gladly refunded.

Only don't be deceived by the many cheaply prepared "Yeast and Iron" tablets sold in imitation of Ironized Yeast. These cheap counterfeits usually contain only the lowest grade of ordinary yeast and iron, and cannot possibly give the same results as the scientific Ironized Yeast formula. Be sure you get the genuine. Look for "IY" stamped on each tablet.

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results guaranteed with the very first package — or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 8411, Atlanta, Ga.

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(Continued from page 6)

GLORIA FISHER, five feet two, dark-haired, dark-eyed, age seventeen wants to hear from everyone. But foreigners, cowboys, cowgirls, sailors and soldiers are her favorites.—17 Prince St., Kingston, N. Y.

JIM SWARTZ wants to hear from girls who like to write to a lonely Kansas boy. He is seventeen, does a lot of swimming and boating and reading—C.C.C. Company 1765, Cass Lake, Minn.

DORA MAY MATHEWSON comes from a theatrical family and knows all about acting and producing plays. She is sixteen years old, with brown curly hair and brown eyes. She wants to know if there are any westerners who are interested in exchanging cowboy songs and souveniers with her. 4 Kinnear Ave., New Britain, Conn.

MILDRED GALLIGAN is five feet two and a half inches tall; blue-eyed, dark-haired. And wants pen pals from all over the world.—210 A North 13th St., Herrin, Ill.

ROBERT MYERS would like to hear from girls about twenty years old which is his own age.—Station Hospital, Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Md.

LILLIAN JUDKINS likes everything about *Rangeland Romances,* especially the *Pony Express.* She is just seventeen years old, a brunette, and a country girl with nothing to do except write letters. Why not try her out?—Upton, Maine.

LONE WOLF JOHNSON is only twenty-one years old but can do all the following: ride, stomp bronks, drive a motorcycle, dance, play tennis, paddle a canoe, pilot a speedboat and tell tall stories. He doesn't mention whether or not he can write; but he does have a yen for pen pals.—640 Liberty Ave., Port Arthur, Texas.

JOHN STROIKE, six foot two, eighteen years old, wants pen pals.—4935 So. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

MAZELLE HOPSON is a dark-eyed, dark-haired lassie who likes to read *Rangeland Romances* and write letters.—Star Route, Electra, Texas.

NOWLIN S. PHILIPS writes that all people who write him will be fully awarded. He is nineteen, dark-haired, and plays baseball.—R.F.D. No. 3, Mount Airy, Md.

J. W. BLACK is a sailor in the U. S. Navy. He would like to correspond with girls about the age of twenty and will swap snapshots.—U. S. S. Sirius, care of Postmaster, Seattle, Wash.

GALA JOHNSON is a brown-haired, blue-eyed miss just sixteen years old. Most outdoor sports are right in her line. But writing letters and reading *Rangeland Romances,* she avers are the best indoor activities. She also likes stories by Robert Dale Denver. Would somebody load a letter on the old Pony for her.—Route 2, Box 41, Black Water, Va.

GENEVIEVE ELLIOT likes dancing, hiking and boating. If some boy writes to her she'll tell him all about Salmon fishing on the Columbia River which she says is very exciting. Genevieve is brown-haired, blue-eyed and sixteen.—Altona, Washington.

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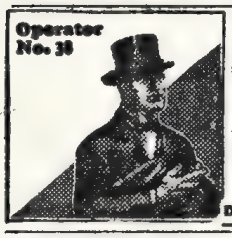

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Girl of the Feud Trails

POLLY WENTWORTH was at her father's bedside when he died in the little ranch-house bedroom. "Pull off my boots, Polly-gal," he muttered. "I wouldn't give that Tim Haynes the satisfaction of knowin' his bullet got me. . . . "

"*Tim?*" Polly's heart felt strangely tight.

Her father's breath came hard. " . . . red horse . . . " he muttered. And then he was very still.

Polly's grief, her bewilderment, was too deep for tears when the preacher mumbled the last prayers over old Brazos Wentworth's grave in the little white-fenced burial ground. Those last words of her father kept ringing in her ears—"red horse."

For Tim Haynes, swaggering, tow-headed, with the irrisistible go-to-hell look in his blue eyes, always rode that strawberry roan. There wasn't another like it in the valley. And the Hayneses and the Wentworths had been gunning for each other for the past fifteen years. . . .

It hurt Polly, hurt her way down deep, to remember how Tim Haynes had risked the feud bullets of old Brazos Wentworth, as the youngster had sided her home from the school dance only last week. If she and Tim hadn't had those secret rides together along Lost Canyon trail, it might have been easier somehow. Or if she hadn't believed in him, loved him so implicitly, some of the bitterness might have been spared her. Why, Tim had told her he was going to ride to Jackpine last week, to see about getting a preacher there for a midnight marriage!

But now Tim—her Tim—was a killer, a murderer, his hands dyed in her father's blood! She could never know love nor ecstasy again. In the place Tim had held in her heart, there would only be hate and bitterness.

Numbly, she watched the auction of the little ranch-house, of the battered piano, always out of tune, that her father had brought overland from Kansas so long ago. She'd heard, without knowing, the rich grazing land, and most of the cattle go for half their value. And she remembered with a detached bitterness that the Hayneses were supposed to own the bank. . . .

Someday, she swore, she'd ride back to pay off that Haynes bunch—and even the score against Tim Haynes!

One of the neighbors, a man who had settled in the Valley along with her father, had seen to it that she kept the bunch of two hundred yearling beeves gathered for market and held in the second coulee. He told her, "I hear old Marsh Haynes is figgerin' on a drive to get his own stuff to Trail City. You can get a fancy price for them beeves if you hurry. Best hire some hands, an' see if you can get there first."

She thanked him, and told him that she had no money to hire hands with. But—

"I'll show the Haynes bunch of murderers that one Wentworth's better than any bunch of gunmen they can hire," she said to the rancher.

She started alone, with the two hundred head before dawn the next day. Singing to the cattle on the bed grounds; going with only a bite of jerky and a mouthful of brackish water for her three meals, she was scarcely out of the saddle. The North Fork was flooded, yet without hesitation, she plunged in along with the point of her herd. Six times she risked her life in that foaming water, and came out half drowned, with twenty-five head lost. She didn't stop for regrets or rest. She kept on.

A hundred miles more. Ten more days, anyway. And then, when three of those days had passed she saw the rising column of dust that told her of a trail herd that was rapidly pushing in behind her. Vainly she drove the wearied cattle, trying to spur them on until she knew that for their sake as well as her own she had to rest.

Then it was that, guarding the slumbering herd on a moonlit night, she heard the rattle of gun-fire; caught the thud of hurrying hoofs. The beeves

snorted uneasily. Angry, desperate, she rode out to investigate the noise.

As she rode her horse into a bosky couvert she saw Tim Haynes. There was no mistaking that red roan. He was pounding toward her. She raised her saddle gun, lined the sights on his white calf-skin vest, her eyes smouldering. Yet something deeper than hate; something more firmly rooted in her than the call of blood vengeance made her lower the weapon. Even a murderer she couldn't shoot down without a chance!

Boldly then she rode out into the moon-flooded dust of the trail, as Tim Haynes, on his great red stallion, spurred toward her, shouting; his pistol gleaming in his hand. For an instant she hesitated, then her rifle leaped; orange flame lanced from the muzzle, and she saw Tim Haynes reel in the saddle and clutch at the horn as his horse plunged away, off the trail.

For a moment she was stunned. It seemed as if the bullet that she had sent speeding into the body of Tim Haynes had acutally entered her own heart. Anger, bitterness were forgotten; she could only remember that she had shot Tim—the Tim whose whispers and promises had sent thrills of ecstasy through her. The Tim she would have made a home for if—

Recklessly, she spurred her horse off the trail. Just then she caught sight of two of the Haynes gunmen trail-hands spurring around a bend. She shuddered. Their guns were out, too. They mustn't capture her before she saw Tim, and learned from his own lips that her father had been mistaken! Even if her own cattle were stampeded, or stolen, she knew now, with a definite finality, that Tim's life was all that mattered.

She found Tim. His horse was gone. He was leaning on one elbow, and his calfskin vest was darkly stained. He was lying about two miles from the trail, in a sheltered gully. His gun was on her as she came up.

"Get the hell away from here," he snapped at her. "You little fool—"

She made no move to draw her father's cedar-handled forty-four which she carried.

Horses pounded close. She heard the click of Tim's gun-hammer earing back. Then, rapidly he ordered her down beside her. "I tried to ride out to warn you, Polly. These gun-hands my father hired—mutinied on the trail. They want to take over our herd; yours, too. They tried to capture me, and then get you—" He stopped; gasping for breath; his gun wavered in his hands.

"I—I was in Jackpine when I heard yore dad was bushwhacked," he went on weakly. "I didn't ride the roan that day. My father was—ready for peace, but he wanted to make this drive in a hurry. Took on a lot of strange gunies—who had their own reasons for prolonging that feud between us. . . . " He suddenly went limp. . . .

About forty miles on from the crossing of the North Fork there were four unmarked graves, likely ploughed under by now, and forgotten. Four bodies were there, bullet-shattered by the blasting guns of Polly Wentworth and her lover whom she had wounded. Until midnight she kept up the battle, holed up with her man, protecting him with her own body and flaming gun from the renegade's lead. And when red dawn came, when the raiders of the trail were either dead or had pounded away, Polly Wentworth, powder-grimed, her left arm torn by a rifle slug, dragged Tim Haynes onto her own horse, rode for the nearest settlement and a doctor.

Later, they gathered what was left of the herds. But it didn't matter so much, after all. For old Marsh Haynes was glad enough for peace; glad enough that Polly had wiped out the killer of his one-time enemy, and that she had believed enough in Tim to save his life.

"I always thought there was some good in the Wentworths," old Marsh growled. "But damned if I thought it would take a gal to prove it!"

She blushed at that. And Tim's arm tightened around her waist. He knew that she would keep on proving it for the rest of her life.

RANGE RIDER.

TRAIL OF LAWLESS HEARTS

By Robert Dale Denver

(Author of "Gun-Queen of Tombstone Basin," etc.)

Could Rita Quest, believing that the man she loved had killed her uncle, stifle the feeling for him that burned within her? Could she bait a death-trap for him—even though the life and safety of a hundred brave men and women depended on his capture?

RITA QUEST, who had managed her own small ranch since she was sixteen, was not easily moved. But these people, these pilgrims—Easterners and Mid-Westerners—who were to trek across mountains and desert to pioneer the undeveloped Valle Verde, stirred her down to the high heels of her boots. In their venture was the finest spirit of the West, all the daring of the Oregon and Santa Fé trails, the flaming courage that had challenged the snow-blocked Sierras and Death Valley.

Before the little tents which had been pitched between the Camas town and the railroad, women struggled cheerfully against flying dust to cook in the awkward Dutch ovens. Children, ranging from older boys breaking a team of wild burros down to toddlers underfoot crowded about and ran with shrill cries of excitement through the camp.

The men were busy unloading new green wagons from cars, lumber, coils of barbed wire and plows. Others were trying out the horses that were to freight them to their valley home; unskilled hands fast getting the savvy of the reins.

A Romantic Novel of Outlawed Love.

A cheerful scene, a brave one, and the girl as she watched thrilled to it. She had brought a carload of horses from her own ranch, range chunks, cross of Norman stallions and blocky range mares, to sell to her uncle, the promoter of the new colony, Bob Quest. A hundred and fifty dollars a span for them, Bob Quest had paid, but the check had not brought the satisfaction that she got watching the busy camp of the settlers.

Here was courage, spirit in unlimited quantity. And yet looking on these people the girl felt an inexplicable dread, a premonition of disaster. Queer that Al Brannigan, oldish, bow-legged foreman on her ranch who was standing near, should have that same feeling.

His wise old eyes surveying the busy people on the flat, Al Brannigan spoke up suddenly. "Feel like bettin', lady boss? I'll lay yuh five to one them pilgrims never git where they're a-headin'."

"Why not, Al?" Rita demanded, startled that his age-seasoned wisdom should bear out her own fear.

Al did not answer immediately, but finished rolling a cigarette. Rita's uncle, Bob Quest, white-mustached and genial, was superintending the loading of a great cargo of flour and grain and seed in the wagons of one of the half-dozen jerkline outfits. Standing by Quest was Lee Desbro, nephew of Luther Holloman, the banker-rancher from whom the Valle Verde acreage had been bought.

A big blond, handsome fellow, young Desbro. When he had been introduced to Rita, he'd stood looking at her, reluctant to let go her hand, held by her beauty, her mingled grace and strength and the depth of her clear blue eyes below the coiled mass of coppery hair.

"Lord!" Lee Desbro had said a little wonderingly, "I never thought there were women like you, Miss Quest. There aren't

—around Camas. You'd be a lot for a man to live up to!"

The girl had colored a little; this Lee Desbro was likable, and there had been only respect in his voice. In her two days in Camas, Desbro had been so attentive that Bob Quest had teased his neice unmercifully.

LEE DESBRO, catching Rita's eye now, waved to her and then stepped forward to help the men move a big packing case. It leaped ahead under the force of his big shoulders. A man who got things done, a hustler was this young Desbro, destined to be wealthy Luther Holloman's heir. Rita, smiling a little, turned back to Al Brannigan.

"Why do you think they'll never get to the Valle?" she insisted.

"This town o' Camas," said Al deliberately, "is hard. Full o' snakebloods. They're almost as rotten as their whiskey." Back in Texas Al had been taught to appreciate good liquor and good men.

A three-year-old boy, escaping from the tents, waggled his short legs across the dusty road, directly in the course of a plunging team drawing a careening wagon. Al dropped his cigarette to run to the child; but the girl was before him like a streak. She scooped up the boy, and flashed back to safety with his softness cuddled close to her, wiping away his tears with her scarlet scarf.

Holding the baby she turned on Al almost fiercely. "They've *got* to make it!" she cried. "A hundred children like this one will be with them. They can't fail out there on the desert. And what's to stop them? Uncle Bob has promoted colonies like this before."

"Not out o' Camas, he ain't," said Brannigan dourly. "Yore Uncle Bob is smart, but in this cussed town he's only a pilgrim, too. No sir, Rita, these people will see a heap o' hell, but they'll never see the Valle Verde. I dunno how they won't; mebbe the men engineerin' it ain't decided just that yit. But these people won't ever git where they think they're a-goin'."

Rita held the baby to her protectively. She trusted Al's opinion on men and horses. He know them both. A few days and these pilgrims would be stringing out across that dusty, gray desert—women, children, men. And some menace—all the greater because it was hidden—threatened them. Something down in her said so. A nameless dread.

"You're loco, Al," she declared. "So'm I. I got a feeling of the same sort. We're both loco."

The young mother came up to reclaim her lost baby, and Rita gave him up, with envy for that adorable little warm bundle. Some day, she hoped, she'd be holding a baby, too; her own.

It was nearly noon, and she headed back to the hotel where she and her uncle stayed. Passing the little freight depot with her quick stride, she suddenly halted. From behind a huge pile of boxes a black horse and his rider loomed suddenly, the animal rearing wildly against the bit.

Rita had a flashing glimpse of the rider as the horse bore down blindly on her, as she tried to throw herself backward, knowing she would be too late. And then miraculously an arm of the rider circled her, snatched her up and held her, while with the other arm he reined the horse back cruelly.

Held high in the vise of the arm, she was swung for a half minute until the man quieted the black. Lowered, her feet touched the planks of the freight platform, and while the arm supported her a moment longer, she got her balance. She knew that the rider's quick action had been the only means of saving her from being knocked down, perhaps trampled, yet an unreasoning anger swept her.

Her eyes, snapping sparks, met the gray

ones in the lean bronzed face, eyes in which little flames seemed to play, under the long curly black hair which edged out from under the big sombrero.

She had seen this man the day before; her uncle told her he was the one who had brought in eighty head of horses from the Caballo Mountains for the new colony. She had heard of this Brady Burgess, a dangerous man; a half outlaw. She had dimly realized that he was a man apart; there she sensed in him a wild and untamed spirit, one that was never broken to the harness of law and custom. A man that feared neither man, horse nor devil, and maybe had none too much respect for God. He sat a saddle of black leather ornamented with silver.

"Miss, I'm sorry," Burgess said, but his voice held a little mocking amusement.

"You might look where you're riding," Rita snapped.

He laughed then at the girl's flash of spirit. "I might," he drawled, "but I'm glad I didn't." Their eyes had locked, the blue ones of the girl, the lighter ones of the man. In that instant something passed between them, an electric contact that Rita couldn't explain—and couldn't dismiss any more than her premonition of disaster to the Valle Verde colonists.

IT WAS a queerly disturbing sensation to Rita Quest, twenty and heart-free. From this man came a definite force that awoke to life in her dormant impulses, emotions that she had only dreamed she possessed. Disturbed, rebellious, she shivered a little. "A man you'd hate to have hate you," Al Brannigan had commented when he had seen Brady Burgess the day before.

"And one you'd hate almost as much to have love you," Rita thought now.

Still unreasonably angered and disturbed, she turned away. Then she swung back as jingling spurs rounded the freight house. She saw her uncle and Lee Desbro, and by their side came Quanah Wallis, the sheriff, with two deputies, their stars shining in the sunlight, following.

"Want to see you, Brady," said the sheriff, his voice coming sharp. "About them Tumblin' K horses of Lin Gentry's yuh turned in on the Valle Verde contract. Yuh claim yuh bought 'em from Lin."

Silence fell for a moment. The face of the man in the black leather saddle hardened. "That's it," he said curtly.

"Lin's up in Utah, as yuh know," said the sheriff. "But he sent word he never sold 'em to yuh. Eighty horses yuh sold these colonists through Bob Quest. They was mostly Lin Gentry's horses. Yuh ain't paid Brady for them horses yet, Quest?"

"No," said Bob Quest. "We was due to settle today. Guess yuh better bring in the bill of sale for those Gentry horses, Brady, before I pay over the money. Just a matter of form."

"The bill of sale's up at my cabin in the Caballos," said Brady Burgess.

"Tell yuh what," said Bob Quest genially, "yuh ride out and bring in that bill of sale t'night at the hotel. I want everything all reg'lar for those emigrants; the money they're payin' for their work stock was hard earned."

Brady Burgess looked at the sheriff and the deputies, then at Desbro and Rita's uncle. "I'll have that bill of sale tonight," he said. "You have your money ready. If I don't get paid for those horses, those emigrants don't go to the Verde!"

And then Brady Burgess turned the black and jogged away, his back to the sheriff and deputies. The girl saw Sheriff Quanah Wallis' hand move toward the six-shooter at his hip, and saw it move away again slowly, as if reluctant to lose the chance to shoot Brady Burgess in the back. . . .

SHE had supper that night with her uncle and Lee Desbro in the log-beamed dining room of the crazily-built old adobe hotel. Originally one story, there had been added a pair of two-story wings with outside staircases, on each side of a court that was open on the street.

"Uncle Bob," she told her uncle as he and Desbro lighted cigars, "let your niece give you a little advice. I wouldn't want to lose my only relative. If I were you I'd told that Burgess hombre that I'd do something, I'd make sure I did it."

"Have the money ready to pay him for those horses, yuh mean?" chuckled Bob Quest. "He's a bad one all right, that wolf, but there'll be no trouble between him and me. I'll pay him for those horses, if and when he brings in that Lin Gentry bill of sale. Which he won't be doing, accordin' to Sheriff Wallis. If Brady produces a bill of sale, it will be a forged one. Sheriff Wallis ought t' know; he's Gentry's brother-in-law. They'll serve a warrant for Brady's arrest if he comes back tonight."

The girl drooped a little at that. "So he did steal those horses?" she said dully.

"Sure," said Lee Desbro. "But that's nothin' to what he has done. He's had this town buffaloed a long time, but his account's due for a settlement. Him and his gang of neighbors in the Caballos have been stealin' cows and horses from my Uncle Luther's big ranch for years."

"He won't put anything over on these settlers of mine," said Quest quietly. "Threatenin' to stop 'em from travelin'!"

Desbro nodded. "Brady's asked to have his horns knocked down," he stated. "They haven't been able to get the goods on him until now. My uncle can afford to lose a few head of stock, but if he'd collected for the Gentry horses, that money would be out of the pockets of those tenderfeet. We can't have that. This town, or the decent people in it like Luther Holloman, wouldn't stand for it."

Rita felt a rush of gratitude. "I'm glad you folks see it that way," she said. "You mustn't allow those people to fail."

Desbro nodded his handsome head. "You're right. They're real pioneers, and we're all pulling for them. . . . What you doing tonight?" he asked Bob Quest. "Luther Holloman and a few others got a poker game on. You can leave word here where to find you if Brady should come in. Of course I'm not in the game. I hoped Rita and I could sit in the lobby and talk."

"I'm tired," said the girl quickly. "I think I'll go to bed early." She couldn't explain altogether why she refused Lee's invitation, but it was partly disappointment at learning that Brady Burgess was a low-down horse thief. A man who'd try to take mean advantage of helpless, unsuspecting people.

Lee Desbro, with his mind on the poker session, made no objection. "We'll take a ride then tomorrow," he suggested, and Rita nodded absent-mindedly. She was thinking of Brady Burgess.

And she was still thinking of him after she had gone to bed. From down the street where bullwhackers, freighters, railroad men, cowboys gambled and drank every night came the noise of revelry, but she hardly heard the distant uproar.

Desbro, she was sure, would ask her to marry him on that ride tomorrow. And why shouldn't she accept? He was Luther Holloman's nephew, as steady as a man could be and still be a man in this town. Why should she be thinking of Brady Burgess, outlaw, horse thief, with his look of an eagle among the gaunt mountain peaks?

Her room, a corner one on the second floor of the left wing, was reached by an outside staircase from the court. Her uncle's room was the next door, farther along the narrow gallery that ran the length of

the wing, leading to second-story rooms. Rita's room had windows opening above the court and street, and one on a third side that looked down on the roofs of a tier of rooms of a slightly lower level.

It must have been near midnight when she heard the sound of voices in the court below, a shuffle of feet. Rita got up, went to the window. There was enough light to see the shadowy figures of a huddled group of men. In a moment they separated. Two, carrying shotguns, climbed to the roof of the one-story step at the end of the other wing. Two men with rifles went into the lobby. Two crouched in the thick weedy growth of the wall opposite.

Sheriff Quanah Wallis and the two remaining men came to the flight of stairs leading to the balcony opening into the second-story rooms, her own, her uncle's and two others. Their high-peaked hats bobbed beneath her as they climbed the stairs. They carried shotguns and rifles.

She realized then why they were here—to meet Brady Burgess. They were expecting him to come back, bringing a forged bill of sale, and they were going to ambush him. Desbro had taken her uncle down the street to a poker game, either by chance or purposely to get him out of the way. A settlement was due with Brady Burgess, outlaw.

THE door of her uncle's room opened and the three men went inside it and closed the door. When Brady Burgess came, they would shoot him down like a wolf stealing into a sheep pen. . . .

All her life Rita Quest had lived in a law-respecting community where justice was swift, impartial, sure. But always it was justice—not slaughter. This bushwhacking sheriff and his deputies made Rita Quest sick.

Sick with more than mere sympathy for a man that was to die: this horror was stronger, all because a certain man, Brady Burgess, had held her in his arm for a moment. She said his name caressingly to herself.

When he came up those stairs to enter her uncle's room, they would blast him to pieces with shotguns. The weapon of men who play it safe, wanting more certainty than a slug from a .44 or .45.

Her mind raced. She knew the arguments justifying the sheriff. The world was better off without Brady Burgess and all outlaws. What matter how they were gotten rid of—trapped or killed—just so they were ended?

She was shivering as the hotel settled to quiet again. The wind moved softly through the branches of the trees in front of the hotel, rattling a window gently. Sleep was out of the question. She slipped on her riding breeches, her boots and the man's shirt she wore.

Minutes dragged by. A half-hour, an hour. They would know about how long it would take for Brady to ride to his ranch in the Caballos and back. Soon he would come.

On the trail leading into Camas from the north came the quick beat of a horse's hoofs, and a rider loped into the shadows under the trees in front of the hotel court. As the man slipped from his saddle, his horse shook his bit chains impatiently. Rita caught the glint of silver ornaments on a black leather saddle, the only black leather rig in the country.

A paralysis came to the girl then. She saw those reckless, flaming eyes that could hold hell and heaven both for the woman that Brady Burgess loved. She saw his tall figure coming along the sidewalk straight for the staircase that led to her uncle's room. The sheriff had a light burning there; the lighted squares that were to beckon Brady Burgess to his death.

The click of his boot heels galvanized

her to action. She flung open the hinged window. "Burgess! Brady Burgess!" she shouted. "Get back! It's a bushwhack trap!"

CHAPTER TWO

Call of Reckless Blood

LEANING far out of her window, looking into the well of the big court, Rita saw the sombreroed figure plunge into the darkness of the bushes. At her call gun-barrels raised from the roof parapet opposite and from behind the balustrade of the balcony of the other wing, but before the first burst of flame and explosion came the cowboy was plunging into a narrow passage that led to the rooms about a small back patio.

Shotguns hurled buckshot that slapped into the adobe wall and shredded the brush under it. The door of her uncle's room was flung open, and the sheriff and the two men inside rushed out on the stair landing.

"Damn that girl for interferin'!" shouted Wallis. "Git him."

Yelling savagely, men plunged toward the passage that Brady had taken. All over the hotel men were yelling. Around the hotel were vacant lots which the fugitive would not dare to attempt to cross with the sheriff's party ready to fire from windows and doors.

Boots clumped up and down stairways and along the galleries of the wings. Guns crashed madly. A sharp yell came from a deputy, hit by a bullet from a fellow lawman's gun. A pane of glass in the window of the girl's room fell with a crash, the bullet smacking into the door of her closet.

Men called to each other and booted feet ran across the roof that lay a little below the level of the window of the girl's room. The hunt was confused, but they were sure to find him sooner or later. Their numbers made certain of that.

Behind Rita Quest there was a slight sound as an open window was lifted higher. The light through the square was blocked out by a man's body. Someone vaulted lightly inside, jingling a spur faintly over the sill.

Rita shrank back in the shadow of the hanging Mexican blanket that served as curtain. Then her eyes distinguished the outline of the figure by the window.

"Who is it?" she called. "Is that you, Brady Burgess?" Her voice was so low it could not be heard outside the room.

"Yes," said the intruder and he came forward, peering at her. The snout of the pistol he held slithered into leather. "You're the girl I nearly ran over today. I'm sorry again. I didn't guess this was a lady's room. It was you that sang out that warning?"

"Yes, I called out. The hotel is full of deputies. What can you do?"

"One thing I can do is get out of your room," he returned. "And to thank you for warning me. That was plumb white, miss. Better stick in that corner until I get out. There's a pair of scatterguns up on the roof directly opposite."

He turned back toward the window and Rita Quest ran noiselessly across to take his arm and jerk him back. "Are you crazy?" she whispered. "Going out that window!"

Voices came almost directly from the roof outside. "I think he must of ducked into one of the rooms along here. Likely the corner one where the girl is."

"We'll take a look," called the sheriff. Abruptly on the bolted door of Rita's room came the heavy pound of a fist. The sheriff's voice came, low-pitched but commanding. "Open up. We're going to search in there. You was friendly enough to warn him; you might be hidin' him now.

Open up quick or we'll bust down the door."

The guns had been silent for a few seconds. Now one bellowed from the roof of the other wing. "There he goes!" bawled a man. "Look out for him on the east."

The sheriff cursed and his boots pounded down the staircase. Rita breathed freely again.

"They'll not search this room if I don't want them to," she said determinedly.

"Thanks," drawled Brady Burgess, "but I can't remember hiding behind a woman's skirts lately. And if they come in, they're jumpy enough to shoot you instead of me. The courtyard's my best chance. They've left my horse below." He was moving toward the door.

"But you're not stepping out there—into their guns?"

"Nothing else," he said carelessly. "If I'm stepping into their guns, they'll also be stepping into mine." His hand touched her arm, guided her gently to the side. "Duck behind the door when I open it. They'll think I came out of one of the other rooms, once I'm on the landing. You don't want your name, whatever it is, mixed with mine."

SHE resisted the pressure of his hand for a moment. It was like a caress, the touch of this man who took so savage a pride in his independence, a foolish pride perhaps, but an unbelievably brave one. She drew a breath that was half sob, and a queer feeling came to her: that she would willingly put her body between this man and the bullets that waited for him.

He stood for a moment, looking down at her, smiling a little. "There is one way you can help me," he stated. "A kiss for good luck."

He had dropped her arm. Nothing compelled her to step near to him, nothing except the compulsion of the overwhelming emotion that brought her to lift her face, to put a hand on his shoulder. For a moment they stood close, looking at each other, their faces palish blurs in the semi-darkness, and then he stooped and his lips brushed hers.

"A kiss for good luck, Brady Burgess," she said tremulously, and then deliberately she kissed him, pressing her lips against his mouth. His arms went about her, to hold her tightly while she tried to keep her body from trembling.

"I reckon," he said soberly, "we won't see each other again, even if I get through this. I'm not your kind. They've been trying to burn me and my neighbors in the Caballos with the outlaw brand for a long time. I owe you a debt I probably can never pay.

"It's not likely I'll stay in this country, but as long as I am, and if you should ever have any need for me, ride to the foot of the cliffs we call the Kettle Domes in Canyon Negro in the Caballos. You'll find in the brush below the middle one a pile of wood. Light it and wait for me. I'll be sure to come: if I don't see it, one of my neighbors will and will bring me word. Remember, the Kettle Domes. I'll never forget you nor what you've done. If things had gone different, but—" he shrugged, smiling a little. "Anyway, *adios.*"

His arms dropped to his sides and his lips brushed her hair lingeringly. Then he lifted her to the shelter of the room corner and was at the door in two long-legged strides, his fingers pushing back the lock.

Under the tension of the moment the girl's lips parted to scream, then her small hand came up over her mouth forcing back the cry. Burgess was opening the door; swiftly the outline of his figure appeared and was blotted out. He was gone.

She stood stock still, while her heart measured an age between each beat, wait-

ing. Nothing she knew could ever horrify her as much as this waiting, listening for the guns to blast into eternity the man whose arms seemed still about her.

Outside, a great bellowing voice split the silence. A shot boomed out, and then arose a mad bedlam—the hoarse shouts of men, the crashing thunder of shotguns and six-shooters, pierced by the shrill cry of a man whose body had been torn by lead. Swiftly the girl raced to the window which looked out on the court.

On the landing of the outside staircase of the opposite wing stood a man with a shotgun to his shoulder; Rita saw him one moment, and then he was toppling over the rail and plummeting to the flat stones of the courtyard. She saw darting tongues of guns from the roof tops and from the window of a room under her, all centered on the figure who was backing toward the street, a flaming gun in his hand—It was Brady Burgess.

Then, his gun empty, he turned in one flashing movement and swung into the saddle of his horse, left there by the sheriff perhaps as lure to draw the owner. And above the mad drumming of hoofs came a ululating yell of defiance from the rider.

SHERIFF WALLIS was shouting for men to get to horses, to try to cut off the fugitive from the Caballos. Two men, claiming that Burgess had been hit, were looking for signs of blood in the dusty street where he had mounted.

The lights in the lobby that had been extinguished when the fight began, appeared again. Men were running for the hotel court from the saloons and gambling houses. In one of the first groups were her uncle; the banker, Luther Holloman, tall like his blond nephew, Lee Desbro; and Desbro himself. The sheriff squawled out the news to them.

Banker Holloman stood over the crumpled body of the man who had fallen from the landing. "That Brady," he said, his voice rising hard and cold, "resisted arrest and killed a deputy here. He came back to get that money from Quest by running a bluff on a fake bill of sale. He's an outlaw for fair now. He'll be outlaw until the day he is killed."

Rita Quest wanted to go down to tell the banker that he was a liar, that Burgess had not resisted arrest, and never had a chance to surrender. But it didn't matter now. Talk, lies—they couldn't hurt Brady Burgess; only bullets could do that. He was outside the law forever until the day he got killed.

A wind was stirring the limbs of the cottonwoods, and clouds were putting a shutter across the moon. Somewhere out on the desert like a wolf returning to his den, Brady Burgess was riding, maybe with his life blood draining from him.

"A thousand dollars to the man who brings in Brady Burgess," Holloman announced. "Dead or alive." But the "alive" was not necessary. No one would ever bring in Brady Burgess any other way but dead.

Lee Desbro was standing talking quietly to one of the deputies. A man you could depend on not to lose his head, Lee Desbro, and Rita knew he was going to ask her to marry him. A safe man to marry, on the side of the law, manager of his uncle's big ranch—but the man she really loved was an outlaw with a price on his head.

She bolted the door, pretending to be asleep when her uncle knocked, and as a thunder storm swept the town, she sobbed into her pillow, thinking of the man riding through the rain.

She must put away the memory of the time in this room when her lips had met his in a hurriedly snatched moment of ecstasy, when she had almost yielded to

an impulse to tell him her love, to offer to ride with him.

She went to sleep finally, to be aroused again without warning by a shot, then another. Then there was the loud slam of a door and the quick click of boots down the staircase into the court. She flew to the window, instantly wide awake.

There was enough light from the starlit sky that had succeeded the storm to glimpse a man fleeing over the flagstones to the street. A tall man who ran to a waiting black horse and flung himself into the saddle with a motion so swift that horse and man seemed to melt together. And then above the hoofs again came that ululating yell, high-pitched, mocking, the same one that Brady Burgess had given when he rode out of the trap. And the saddle on the horse was black, with silver ornaments.

Light was streaming from the open door of her uncle's room, and she unbolted her door hastily. In the doorway lay the man's body, partly clothed, face downward.

Below from the court a voice called. "That was Brady Burgess all right," he said. "I saw him plain as he run down. What did he come back for? Two shots, weren't they?"

Rita Quest, stopping to throw an Indian blanket robe about her, walked barefoot across the wet floor of the staircase landing. She knelt by the side of the man who lay on his face. She knew it was her uncle, Bob Quest, before she rolled the body over. He had been shot twice through the heart. Blood made a great splotch on his shirt.

Men were climbing the staircase from the court, and someone lifted her just as she started to cry. It was one of the deputies.

"You can't do him no good, miss. Better get into your room. It was that damn Brady Burgess. He come to git his money for those stole horses."

She could hear the talk of the men as she dressed.

Brady Burgess had returned to kill Bob Quest, that genial, kindly soul who had been, in a small way, an empire builder, constructing dams, locating people on dry farms in New Mexico and Colorado, sinking a fortune in a ranching project in Oregon.

Brady had not known that Quest was her uncle, but that made no difference. Brady had come back in a rage, thinking that Bob Quest had set that trap for him. From Quest he had, perhaps, demanded the money for the horses. Bob Quest wasn't the kind to surrender, even before death. And Brady Burgess had killed him and ridden out of Camas and out of Rita Quest's life, taking the trail that would forever separate them. Sheriff Wallis and the rest were right. Brady was a wolf—a killer that had to be ended by poison or traps or guns!

CHAPTER THREE

Bait For a Killer

THE banker, Luther Holloman, stood beside Bob Quest's body and spoke to the crowd of men that packed the hotel courtyard. "I'm raising my offer for Brady Burgess from one thousand to three thousand dollars for him brought in tied over his saddle."

"We've got to get rid of this renegade, gentlemen," declared Holloman, "just as New Mexico had to get rid of Billy the Kid. Burgess must be killed like the mad dog he is, and the same goes for all that crowd that ranch in the Caballos with him—the Dabner brothers, Clay McGann, Tolly Richards and the Eckerts. The whole Caballo Mountain outfit of killers and thieves must be wiped out, but first we'll get their leader, Brady Burgess.

"Three thousand's a lot o' money for a man on the hoof," commented Al Brannigan, lounging against the doorway where Rita Quest, now fully dressed, stood.

The girl hardly heard Brannigan's remark. She was staring down at the blanketed form of Bob Quest. A kindly man, Bob Quest, generous, unselfish. Since her father's death he had advised Rita often about ranch matters, and had once lent her five thousand dollars to tide the ranch over drouth years. He would not have profited much by his colonization scheme of Valle Verde; his pay would have been gotten in the satisfaction of having given people homes. And now he lay dead, killed by Brady Burgess in cold blood.

"Standing here by the body of that good and great man, Bob Quest," went on Holloman, "I'm saying that his work is going on. We'll finish it for him; see that his people get to Valle Verde. I laughed at Bob Quest at first, gentlemen, when he offered to buy that valley for settlement, thinking it too far from the railroad. I figured Bob Quest for a dreamer."

He turned to put a hand on the shoulder of Lee Desbro. "Lee, you're to take charge of these colonists in Bob Quest's place. Go with them, see that they reach the Verde safely and get settled there. If you need more money, I stand ready to furnish it."

"It won't be safe to move out, Holloman, until Brady is done for," Sheriff Wallis put in. "He said if he didn't git paid for them horses, them emigrants wouldn't be goin' to the Verde. If they do start, he'll likely steal all their horses."

"That's true," agreed Lee Desbro. "I'd like to say to hell with Brady—but we've got to get rid of him first!"

Al Brannigan twiddled at the ends of his mustache. "The odds I give yuh yesterday, Rita," he muttered, "about them pilgrims not reachin' Valle Verde—I'm raisin' 'm from five to one to ten to one."

Rita hardly heard him. She was filled with too much emotion, mixed horror and sorrow at the death of Bob Quest, and now deep-felt gratitude for these men who were going to carry out his work. Impulsively she stepped forward.

"Brady Burgess mustn't stop the settlers from reaching the Verde," she declared. "It's fine of you men to back them, Mr. Holloman, and fine of you, Lee, to take them on. I'll go, too, to help where I can."

The men looked at her, a little taken aback by her offer, and then Lee stepped forward to take her hand, his eyes ardent.

"Good," he declared. "We'll take them on together. You can represent your uncle. It will be new stuff to me, having charge of a wagon train, and I'll be glad to have you share the responsibility. But until we've gotten rid of Burgess, we can't pull out. He's got a killer gang with him in the Caballos. I wouldn't put a massacre past the renegades."

"But these people can't wait here until Brady Burgess is disposed of," protested the girl. "They've got to get out to the Valle and get their houses built before winter. If Brady Burgess is stopping them from going, he must be put out of the way. When Brady Burgess first came tonight, I warned him of the gun trap. Because of me he escaped to come back to murder my uncle. I'm going to help get him now."

THE girl's lips were a red straight, determined line. "He said that if I ever needed him or wanted to speak to him, I should come to Canyon Negro in the Caballos, that I'd find three kettle dome cliffs, and at the foot of the middle one, hidden in the brush I'd find a pile of wood. When set afire it would make a smoke signal that he would see, and he'd ride to meet me."

"He told you that!" exclaimed Desbro, and his eyes lit up. "But he may have changed his mind now; he may be afraid to come."

"No," said Sheriff Wallis, "if Brady promised he'd come, he'll come. In Canyon Negro, eh, near the Kettle Domes? Well, then we got him!"

"We could send someone else to fire that pile of wood," said Desbro. "I won't have Rita risking her life." He took the girl's hand again.

Lee Desbro was in love with her; he didn't want her running risks. But Brady, after his last outrage, would be wary of answering that signal fire. If he didn't see the girl waiting alone, he would be too suspicious to expose himself to an ambush.

"We'll talk it over," said the banker. "It sounds good to me, if Miss Quest has the nerve to play her part."

Rita smiled grimly. If she had the nerve! She owed it to her uncle for whose death she was indirectly responsible. And she owed it to the settlers camped down by the tracks, to clear their road of a renegade. . . .

The funeral of Bob Quest was held the next morning, there being no reason for delay, since he had no relatives except Rita. They carried him to the cemetery on the hill outside of town, after the minister preached a short sermon at the tent encampment. Rita Quest looked with a set face on the coffin as it was lowered into the grave.

Desbro was there, and Luther Holloman and Sheriff Wallis with the Valle Verde colonists in a body, the latter all genuinely grieved because they had lost a friend, who was opening the doors to a new land and a new life for them.

After the funeral Rita, Holloman, Wallis and Desbro gathered in the banker's private office to discuss details of the plan that was to end Brady Burgess. They decided that half a dozen men, Desbro and Wallis among them, were to ride to the Caballos that night, hide their horses in Canyon Negro before daylight and go on foot to the base of the three Kettle Domes. There they would await the coming of Rita Quest who was to lure Brady Burgess into range of their guns. It was all a very businesslike arrangement; a trap for a killer, with the girl as bait.

Desbro protested again at the risk to Rita, but the others agreed with her that she was necessary to the plan. Her risk would not be great; the chances were that Brady would come alone to meet her, not wanting company when talking to a pretty girl. Then all she would have to do would be to draw him out into the open, step aside, and let six men line their sights on him.

THAT night, Rita found the three dome-shaped cliffs, two hundred feet high each of them, standing a little apart, with boulders and brush lying at their base. It didn't take long to discover the heaped-up pile of wood, dry cedar mixed with green. Her hand was steady when she gathered a few leaves and dead grass and struck a match. In two minutes a column of black smoke rose straight into the thin dry air.

She had brought sandwiches with her, but she had no appetite and left them in the saddlebags. There was no sign in the canyon of the hidden men, but she knew the six were there. Waiting, she sat on a flat rock, her hands listlessly folded in her lap, her heart beating slowly. Waiting to kill a cold-blooded killer.

When after an hour she heard the click of hoofs behind her, she started and got up. Brady had not ridden down the canyon, but had come through some secret trail that she guessed passed between the Kettle Domes. Then he was suddenly in sight, appearing from the brush and

rocks, as if a secret door in the cliff had opened for him. He rode a bay stallion whose hoofs seemed to spurn the rocks.

Looking again at Burgess, Rita could not quite the sudden tumult within her nor keep her heart from pounding, although outwardly she was cold. He smiled at sight of her and touched the brim of his hat with his fingers, and Rita managed a faint smile in return. She felt a sudden disgust at the part she was playing. They said that blood was thicker than water, but this man—outlaw, renegade, killer that he was—seemed closer to her than her uncle whom Brady had left lying in a pool of blood. She had to think of the settlers waiting in Camas for the time when it would be safe for them to start their trip to Valle Verde.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. His eyes did not go around him watchfully; apparently he had no suspicions.

"You should know," she said, her voice choked, the words sounding as strange as if someone else had said them. Desbro and Sheriff Wallis had warned her to bring him into the open, to the waiting guns.

Burgess shifted in the saddle a little to dismount, and at that moment on the wall behind the right-hand dome there came the crash of a small boulder plunging down a rocky slope, probably shoved out from under the foot of a careless hidden man as he had shifted position. So far as any possible surprise went that accident was fatal: Brady Burgess divined immediately the purpose of the girl's visit.

But instead of racing back into the safety of the rocks, with an oath he spurred ahead, coming straight for her. She heard the explosion of the first gun as he bent far over, and while she stood paralyzed, his arm came about her as it had at the station platform, and swept her from the ground. As he held her tightly, he savagely jerked the stallion around and rowelled the animal. Two more rifles exploded as they plunged into the tall brush where branches whipped her face.

Thirty feet of undergrowth and lashing saplings, and then they were climbing a faintly marked trail that snaked through huge boulders. Up this the bay stallion raced in a series of lunges, scrambling with a mad clatter of hoofs over the rocks to an entrance between walls so narrow that Brady had to stand in the stirrups and hold the girl in front of him.

BULLETS whirred over their heads, spatted against the walls on either side, and ricochetted off ominously. The yells of the men sounded as they came crashing through brush, trying to get a shot at the man who was finding a baffling passage between two of the Kettle Domes. Ahead, a rock wall blocked their path, but Burgess turned the bay horse and the stallion clambered up into the brushy cover of a ledge. From this point a single rifle could easily command the precipitous back trail, keeping back twenty men as easily as one.

He let her down there, and dismounting, without a word went back a few steps with his rifle, leaving her contemptuously to her own devices. She had no weapon; her six-shooter was in the saddle holster on her horse.

His rifle spoke once, and as if made panic-stricken by that single snarling threat, the rifles below fell abruptly silent. Rita guessed that the six men were taking cover. Then Burgess returned, and the girl, facing him, was terrified by what she saw in his gray eyes. Not because of any threat to her, for they held none, but because of the lashing contempt and scorn.

Desperately she felt she had to break the silence. "You've turned kidnaper, too, besides murderer?" she asked, her voice vibrant with sudden anger.

"What does it look like?" he returned,

and stopped a few feet distant, holding his rifle. "When you act as bait for a wolf, and the trap doesn't shut, I reckon the wolf is entitled at least to the bait."

"They'll follow," she said.

"They probably will," he agreed. "They're not cowards down there, whoever they are—Wallis an' Desbro, I guess. They'll follow, but they know if they follow too close or too far they'll be committing suicide. They won't get you back. Maybe I made a mistake," he went on. "Maybe you didn't know you were to be bait for a trap. Maybe they followed you without your knowing it."

"No," she answered, "this was all my idea."

He gave a short, harsh laugh. "I'll give you credit for not lying," he said. "And don't be afraid that I'll kidnap you. What would I want with you? I could take you up to cook or wash clothes for our outfit, but you're not even fit to do that—not even for outlaws, hunted men. They've got me branded with a reward on my head, I reckon, and you tried to help earn it. A lady blood-money hunter!"

"I did not," she said. "Maybe you don't know it, but I'm Rita Quest, niece of Bob Quest."

He looked a little startled at that. "Niece of Bob Quest, eh?" he said. "And they told you that I'd have to be gotten rid of; that I'd keep those people from going on to Valle Verde unless I had pay for my horses. They were right. I'll take my time, but I'll get my pay, and if there was a way to take pay from you for this, I'd take it. But I'll let it cancel what I owe for your warning me that night."

The man seemed utterly indifferent to the murder of Bob Quest. Probably he had no sooner done it than he had dismissed it from his mind.

"They didn't have to tell me, after what you did, that you had to be gotten rid of. You're a wolf, Brady Burgess."

"Wolf, am I?" he growled. "You're right. They'll call me worse than that before I'm done with them. And as for you, don't interfere again. Don't try any of your cheap tricks. Ride back, marry someone like Lee Desbro and live your safe little life. And tell that outfit if they don't know it already that they'll have to kill me before I let up."

He swung into the saddle and spurred his horse along the ledge, leaving Rita Quest standing looking after him, helpless tears in her eyes. If she had had a gun then she would have shot him in the back.

BLINDED with tears of anger, of shame, she scrambled down over the crooked trail. Passing the still smoking signal fire, she found her horse quietly grazing. Men called to her then and appeared, Desbro among the first. They could not blame her for the failure: plainly the man who had started the rock rolling had upset the cart.

The men started out at once to walk to their hidden horses, Desbro keeping by the girl's side. His hand came out to press down on hers resting on the horn of her saddle.

"We'll get him some other way," he said. "I didn't want to use you from the first. It was too dangerous."

She only nodded; weary, heart sick and forlorn. She had been let down. There was a blind spot in that outlaw, whom she had thought she loved. He had no more moral sense than a snake. The killing of the deputy was what any man would have done, fighting his way out of a trap, but the cold-blooded murder of her uncle raised a wall between her and the ruthless, conscienceless Brady Burgess.

"There's no use waiting to get Burgess," she said as they came in sight of the fires of the pilgrim encampment. "We've got to get these people to Valle Verde. We can't let him stop us. I feel

responsible for them. You'll help, move them out, Lee, without delay?"

Desbro hesitated a moment, then he turned quickly in his saddle. "That's the girl!" he said. "Yes, we'll start out with them in a couple of days, and take them through, and neither hell or Brady Burgess can stop us!"

That cheered her up. It had come to a matter of contest between her and that killer, and she would win. But when Desbro tried to put his arm around her, she only said briefly, "Please don't. We've got more important things to do now."

"What could be more important?" he asked, but she had made no reply.

Once she had been willing to put her body between Brady Burgess and bullets, but there was only one thing that remained steadfast: duty. And she had a duty to those people who had been gathered by her uncle.

Real people those, who were taking with them a minister, a pulpit and a box of hymn books for a community church. People who respected the law. A high purpose filled the girl: to see that they got to Valle Verde. And if Brady Burgess got in the way, she would kill him, herself!

CHAPTER FOUR

Night Raid

THEY strung out two mornings later in a golden dawn, a few jerkline outfits each with sixteen horses and three wagons, and two score of the new wagons drawn by two horses. All were heavily loaded—with personal effects and furniture, farm implements and tools, parts for a portable sawmill, grain, flour—all that would be needed to carry them over the winter. There were coops of chickens, a wagon and trailer loaded with swine, a small herd of cattle—milk cows and good beef stock—and extra horses.

While the town's inhabitants watched them, the pilgrims went into the desert, wagons creaking under their heavy loads, dust rolling up from under the first wagons to become a dense, thick cloud by the time all the wheels had had their chance at churning it.

Those wagons were laden, as they had been so often in the West, not only with merchandise, but the high hopes of a venturesome people. They were moving in defiance of Brady Burgess's threat, with an armed escort of six men, specially sworn deputies of Sheriff Wallis. Al Brannigan was in charge of the small herd of cattle, wise old Al, with his pessimistic prediction of failure.

Lee Desbro, in charge, galloped up and down the long train, and much of the time Rita Quest was by his side. Sometimes the inexperienced drivers had trouble with a balky horse or a snarl in the harness, and Lee Desbro had to set it right. One could not have asked for an abler wagon boss than big Lee Desbro, starting off the train in easy stages of daily travel to get horses' shoulders used to the drag of the heavy wagons.

There was no road from Camas: they had to build one as they went; a lengthy, roundabout trail to dodge natural barriers, often two miles for one of crow's flight. The desert, dotted with ranges of hills and mountains, looked deceptive even from a distance. Traversing it were dozens of arroyos deeply eroded and precipitous walled. Some of these had to be bridged. Through a pass in low hills they had to hew and blast a road; at times they were held up for several days road building. The last stage of the journey would be the easiest; a level plain stretching to the Valle Verde.

The colonists, relieved at the break of the long wait at Camas, worked cheerfully; every night around a big bonfire they sang to the accompaniment of guitars

and banjos, and sometimes they danced on a floor of canvas stretched over the ground. Sundays they rested, and the little organ and the hymn books were brought out for services under the sky.

A wonderful people, thought Rita Quest, as she grew to know them all intimately down to the babies. Not a whiner among the lot; all they asked was a chance to work out their own salvation. And Brady Burgess wasn't going to stop them from getting that chance.

YET occasional doubts came to the girl, a suspicion that there was something hidden here, some menace that overhung the wagon train, something beyond Brady Burgess. Al Brannigan still held to his dogged belief that the wagon train was doomed to disaster.

"Look here," Rita told him finally, "you've been throwing cold water ever since this started. Now, you old hellion, come across with what you know."

"Goshamighty, Rita, if I knowed anything," he told her, "I'd spill it. I only got a hunch which I'm willin' to back with good hard money. For one thing, that Holloman, he shore turned noble, didn't he, for a skinflint, crooked banker? Oratin' about helpin' folks to new homes and all. It smelled tuh me."

"But what has he got to gain by not helping these people?" argued Rita. "He sold them the Valle Verde and got only half the purchase price as down payment. If he wants to get the rest, it's up to him to see that these folks succeed."

"Yeah?" said Al, unconvinced. "I tol' yuh Camas was full o' hard men. Such as Sheriff Wallis, the lantern-jawed rattlesnake. No sir, there's goin' to be hell a-poppin'. I wish yuh was back on yore ranch. An' how 'bout that feller that ventilated yore uncle? Got eight or ten pals they say waitin' to pounce on this outfit to git the hosses."

"We'll tend to Brady Burgess when he comes," said the girl confidently. "Lee Desbro isn't asleep."

"No, Desbro ain't asleep," commented Al Brannigan, his eyes narrowing as he looked at the big blond horseman helping repair a broken wagon wheel. "He's the nephew of that crook Holloman, and neither him nor his uncle ever sleeps. Nor misses a trick."

A little doubt puckered the girl's eyes as she looked at Desbro. Nothing definite to put against the big fellow, always amiable, reliable, seeing that the wagon train moved along, although progress had been painfully slow. Well into the fourth week they had bored a circuitous route into the desert, and although Camas had long faded from sight, they had made a great semi-circle, and the north end of the Caballos where Brady holed up was not many miles back of them. He was still within striking distance, whenever he cared to make good that threat.

For three days they had been camped on the rim of a shallow canyon, building a road down into it and out on the other rim. The road was done now and there would be fifty miles of easy trail to reach the Valle Verde. The worst was over—if Brady stayed away.

That evening after the road-builders had returned, their task completed, a storm came out of the black malpais hills to the west, bringing with it a slashing downpour of rain. The camp retreated to the canvas shelters.

Desbro came to the tent where Al Brannigan and Rita were cooking supper. "Fine night for ducks," he remarked.

"And maybe for a raid by Brady," said Al Brannigan.

Desbro shot a quick look at Al, then chuckled. "Fine night for that, too," he agreed. "Let Brady come. We're holding the horses in that little canyon back of camp again. Going to keep all the sheriff's

guards out. If he gets those horses, Brady will have to fight for 'em."

That night as she always did, Rita staked out a saddle horse, one of her three monts, near the tent which she occupied with a widow taking a brood of children into the Valle. After the camp was asleep, Rita, lying in her blanket bed, heard faintly the voices of the guards out at the horse camp.

They sounded as if the owners were drunk, which they probably were, since they had brought an inexhaustible supply of whiskey for the trip. A tough lot, those guards, but the tougher the better if it came to a fight.

When the storm was at its height, with thunder crashing continuously, there came a sharper, different kind of thunder from the canyon where the horses were held. Guns! Brady Burgess had come!

RITA slipped at once into riding breeches, boots, flannel shirt, snatched up her rifle and dashed out into the rain. A dull thudding came out of the storm, the muffled hammer of many hoofs. The horse bunch was in full flight. A fresh burst of shots came, and with it the hoarse yells of men.

In the wet saddle the girl spurred toward the firing, holding her carbine as she raced along. Lightning shook a giant candle across the black sky. By its flash she saw that the small canyon where the horse bunch had been held was empty. She raced down into it and climbed toward the opposite rim. On the slope her horse gave a great lunge to one side; the lightning revealed a dead saddled horse. His rider was not in sight.

From a little hill she caught a glimpse of riders far distant, and the strung-out bunch of horses. The guns boomed once more, and a hundred yards farther Rita came on a second dead horse, and sitting on him, one of the guards sent by Sheriff Wallis. The man either was dazed by the shaking up he had received when his horse fell or he was merely drunk. He mumbled curses and asked her to lend him her horse, but instead impatiently Rita flashed on. She had a settlement to make.

A mile farther a flooded arroyo put forth a muddy barrier. Her horse hesitated on the brink, but Rita spurred him unhesitatingly into the water. The flood carried her downstream, but swimming strongly, her horse clambered up on the opposite bank.

Up ahead the guns had stopped, and she reined in, listening intently. By the fading lightning she saw Desbro and three of the guards, headed back toward camp. One of the men had his head scraped by a bullet, and Desbro was supporting him in the saddle. With the man set afoot, that made five of the seven who had given battle to the raiders. The remaining two rode up shortly after, with Al Brannigan, who had left the cattle herd in charge of the settlers. There had been no attempt to run off the cattle.

Desbro's story was simple. A party of horsemen, led by Brady Burgess, had swooped down, stampeding the horses with pistol shots, driving them off at a gallop. Desbro and the guards had followed, but they had been beaten off. One horse of the raiders had been killed, and the rider had swung up behind a companion.

"It would have been suicide to follow them, even if we could have kept the trail," said Desbro. "I'll send a man to Camas for the sheriff to send out a posse. They've headed south for the Caballos, and it will take an army to go in there. Nothing for us to do now but go back to camp."

"But sending to Camas means a lot of delay," Rita protested. "And supposing they don't take them into the Caballos,

but drive them somewhere else. With all the delay in sending to Camas, we'd never get them back."

Desbro shrugged his shoulders. There was something about all this which baffled Rita. She insisted on examining the wounded man's head, while the others held matches. A scratch beneath the hair had drawn a little blood. That didn't look like a bullet wound to Rita.

She and Al Brannigan rode together on the return to camp, lagging far in the rear. They stopped by the dead horse of the guard who had headed back to camp afoot. Al got down to light a match. The animal, he reported, had been shot through the head by a six-gun.

"Purty close range, too," remarked Al. "Gun held so close the powder singed the hair."

At the second horse, the one belonging to one of the raiders, the pair pulled up likewise and Al lit another match. "Brady Burgess's brand all right," he said. "Mighty close shootin' on this one, too. Six-shooter, close enough to burn it like the other one."

THEY stared at each other, while the storm rumbled in the distance. No need to say anything more. Those two horses plainly hadn't been shot in battle. They had been deliberately killed by a pistol held close to their heads, so there would be no missing in the darkness. Why?

Back at camp a fire had been started and Desbro and the guards stood about it, drying themselves out.

Desbro shook his head. "It's too damn bad he remarked, just as we had a clear track to the Valle. We got to collect a lot o' men. In the mornin' I'll ride over to get some cowboys at Lin Gentry's ranch and we'll take the trail, although there's no doubt they're headin' for the Caballos. And Brady and his pals got a reg'lar fort in there; no way of movin' in on him without bein' seen by some of his men. I figure on taking about twenty settlers, mounting them on horses, to help us when we march against Brady. Don't you worry," he said to Rita. "Everything will come out all right."

"But supposing we don't get back those horses?"

"That'll be bad," admitted Desbro. "But we'll arrange to get others. It will take time, of course."

"And meanwhile these people will sit here."

In the girl's mind there was a growing doubt that swiftly developed into an intuitive certainty that she and these pilgrims were in some way being duped, tricked. Yet, how or why, she couldn't tell.

"Look here," said Desbro, nettled by the girl's silent accusation of carelessness and lack of courage in not following the stolen horses, "we done the best we could. If you hadn't of warned Brady that night, he wouldn't of got away. And we wouldn't of had all this trouble."

"I wonder," said the girl slowly. "I wonder."

"It's plain, ain't it, that Brady took those horses?" snapped Desbro. "That horse that was killed wore his brand. What more can I do than I'm plannin' to do?"

"Do?" she said. "Some of you could at least be following that horse herd."

"That would have meant a easy way to get killed," he pointed out. "And I don't quite feel like dying for this bunch of fool tenderfeet. Look here, don't let's quarrel, Rita. Whatever happens to anyone else, it won't touch you and me. Why not let's you and me go back to Camas, send out the sheriff to clean up this mess, while we get married and go on a honeymoon to the Coast?"

Rita Quest looked at him long and

searchingly, and what she saw in the handsome face she didn't like. She didn't reply. She was certain now that they had walked blindly into a trap. She didn't know what lay behind all this, but those horses killed at short range with a six-shooter, the superficial wound of the guard, all hinted strongly of treachery.

Step by step she went back over the events that had happened since her arrival in Camas, centering her thoughts chiefly on the night of the trap set for Brady Burgess and the murder of her uncle.

There was first no positive proof, except Lin Gentry's word, that Brady had stolen the horses which he had sold to her uncle. They had not given him a chance to present the bill of sale that he claimed he had; if he had brought it that night, they could have planned to take it from his person and dispose of it after his death. Nor was there positive proof that he had murdered her uncle. The four men who claimed they had seen Brady run from the hotel had either been Wallis or Holloman employees. They might have lied. She had seen the running man and a black horse and a saddle that appeared black, but that was not enough to convict a man of murder.

There was nothing she could be sure of, but her distrust of Desbro, Wallis and Holloman grew with each moment.

Al Brannigan, who was squatting on the other side of the fire, got up when she caught his eye, and they withdrew behind one of the big wagons of a jerkline outfit.

He looked at her. "Don't you fret. It was in the cards these people wasn't to get to Valle Verde."

From a tent came the wail of a fretful child. Rita listened, thought of all the children in the camp, the courageous men and women.

"The hell they won't!" she said. "They're getting to the Verde, you hear me? Al, will you ride out with me? I'm going to make certain of some things."

"Shore," said Al. "Where we headin' for—Brady Burgess's den, to ask him to give yuh back them hosses?"

"We're heading for Brady Burgess's den," said Rita Quest. "But I'm not going to ask him to give back those horses. And the reason for that is, I don't think he's got them!"

Al's low chuckle was lost in the jingle of his spurs as he went to get their mounts.

CHAPTER FIVE

Honor of an Outlaw

RITA QUEST and Al Brannigan rode southwest in the darkness, splashing through occasional puddles left from the rain, pushing their horses hard. They had no idea where they would find Brady Burgess, but Desbro had said that the Caballos were so well guarded that no one could ride into them without being spotted by one of Brady's neighbors.

Reaching the north end of the range in the early morning, they entered the mountains by the first well-marked trail and rode steadily along it. The canyon narrowed between high, precipitous walls and ended finally at the foot of a towering cliff.

There, as they paused, a voice called to them from a man hidden among the rocks, surlily demanding their business. Rita told it: they wanted to see Brady Burgess. Upon which an old puncher, carrying a rifle in the crook of his arm, stepped out and stood regarding them sharply.

"So yuh want to talk to Burgess," he said finally. "You're the girl that tried to bait him into a trap, eh? If I was you, I'd stay away from Brady."

"But I must see him," insisted Rita. I've got to see him!"

The old puncher looked at her shrewdly and then, without a word he made his way to a little corral which was hidden back in the brush, saddled the pony in it and led the way up a trail that swung along the foot of the escarpment. She hardly noticed the route; it was a crazy, zigzag trail, poorly marked, ending at last on a broad shelf under a great overhanging cliff high above a canyon floor.

Passing between two huge pillars of rock that made a natural portal, they came to a little park, at the far end of which lay a cabin. Nearby the cabin were corrals which contained a dozen head of horses.

The cabin door swung open. Brady Burgess appeared, coming down to meet the three riders near the corral. Impassive of face, he looked at them.

"I brung her up, Brady," said the old rider. "She claimed she had to see yuh. If yuh don't wan't to talk to her, pitch her over a cliff."

Rita dismounted. Al and the old guide withdrew to water their horses at a little pool under a ribbon of waterfall. Brady invited the girl to a stump seat by the corral gate, but she remained standing.

"I came to see you, Brady Burgess," she said, her voice a little tremulous, "because you're the only one I can trust. I did start to bring you into a trap, but I couldn't have gone through with it. I knew you killed a deputy sheriff, when you escaped from that ambush. They told me you were an outlaw, a horse thief, and from the hotel I saw a black saddle and black horse. Then I heard a yell that sounded like yours when the man who had killed my uncle rode away. I was sure that you killed my uncle, and I hated you. I wanted to make you pay. And I hated you most of all because you wanted to keep the emigrants from reaching Valle Verde."

Brady said nothing. There was no encouragement in his face, nothing but indifference.

"I didn't know this country nor its people," she continued. "Sheriff Wallis and Desbro and Holloman offered to help the settlers, and I threw in with them. If you were innocent of killing my uncle, you were right that I wasn't even good enough to cook for your outfit. But the horses were stolen last night—all of the stock used in pulling the wagons."

HE shrugged his wide shoulders. "And Brady Burgess of course got them," he said, and there was a sardonic expression on his broad mouth. So you came here to ask me to give them back. Is that it?"

"No," she said, "not to *give* them back. To *get* them back." She spread her arms, dropped her hands in a helpless gesture. "Brady, outlaw or not, I think you're the only man in this country that I can trust to help us."

"And yet I killed your uncle?"

"The evidence," she said in a low voice, "convicted you. I fought against believing you had come back to kill him, but what else could I believe? Still, you didn't seem the kind that would do it. And you didn't. Whoever killed Uncle Bob, must have a black saddle like yours. You didn't seem the kind to steal those horses, and leave those settlers afoot out in the desert."

"So that's what you think, eh?" said Brady after a long pause. "And now you think I may not have killed your uncle and stolen those horses from Gentry? That's pretty nice of you."

"I *know* you didn't!" she said determinedly. "And you didn't steal those horses last night, either. They left a dead saddle horse wearing your brand—it was shot at close range. It was a plant. I can trust nobody—least of all the men who claimed they would do everything they could to help these people get to Valle Verde. I think now they don't want them ever to get there. I'm sure Holloman re-

gretted that he had sold the valley. He must have figured he could sell it again at a higher price, if these colonists forfeited their first payment."

"That sounds reasonable, if you knew Holloman," he admitted. "He does tricks like that. But where do you figure I come in?"

"As the goat," said the girl bluntly. "They wanted to drive you out of the Caballos, and to do it; they've put the horse thief and killer brand on you. I'm positive that Desbro and Holloman had those horses run off last night."

He smiled grimly. "You've seen quite a bit of light if you have seen all that."

"I have," she said humbly. "Brady, tell me, you didn't steal those horses last night?"

"If we had," he said, "we wouldn't be sitting in this cabin taking it easy. We'd be out driving them somewhere. And we'd have grabbed them before this. I had a little scrap of sense left after that train started; those horses had passed into the hands of innocent people, and I wasn't quite tough enough to set those people afoot in the desert. Sheriff Wallis has had men hunting the Caballos for us; they've burned our ranch houses, forced us to hole up here. We've rounded up our own horses; we're going to move north with them in a few days. We're licked.

"We could fight, but it would be no good; we'd have to kill too many men, and in the end we'd be wiped out. If I were alone, I'd fight, but some of my neighbors, they've got families which they've sent out of this mess. We'll drive north to a range where they won't bother us. We're leaving," he finished bitterly, "with our tails between our legs like whipped dogs."

"You've yourselves to consider," she said. "I've no right to ask help from you. I know it's all hopeless, but these people will never make it. They're beaten, too—set afoot out there. They may never get back alive. Desbro is planning to lead some of them into the Caballos, against you. It will be easy to fake a battle; he could kill a few of them and blame it on you."

"I wouldn't put that past him," Brady Burgess agreed. "But that doesn't concern you and me, Rita." She started a little, hearing him use her name. His voice had lost its sternness. Hope flared in her, then died.

"I know it's none of your concern," she declared. "It's the colonists' fight. If they had horses, if they knew this country and weren't such tenderfeet, I wouldn't ask help for them. They'll fight, but they need range men to trail their horses. My uncle promised to get those people through to Valle Verde; he was killed, and I've promised myself to see them through. Can't you do something; help out a little? Everything I own, a ranch over on the Bravo, anything I have is yours if you'll only help. I'm begging you to help, Brady!"

HE stepped a little nearer, his compelling eyes fixed on hers. "You, Rita Quest," he said, "no matter what you did to me, I'd never forget you, never refuse anything you might ask. I've thought of you every hour, all these long weeks." His hand came out, touched her arm. "I loved you, Rita, from the first. I kept on loving you even after I thought you had betrayed me. Supposing I could help these people; supposing I didn't want to ruin them. Supposing I wanted—you."

She stared at him. "Brady," she said calmly, soberly, "you could have me. I love you, too. My heart said that you were innocent. But Brady, you're hunted, doomed to hang if they ever capture you. I was insane to think of asking you to stay and help."

"If I had only myself to consider," he said tensely, "I'd go in a minute. But, Rita, darling, it's my neighbors, Sam and Charley Dabner, the Eckerts and the rest.

If I took them into a fool venture like this—staying on, against the guns of the law—I'd be guilty of murdering them. We'd be fighting three or four hundred men—all the men and guns that the Holloman money can hire."

"I know that," she said. "But those pilgrims—men, women, and children—all of them are decent people; they deserve their chance." She turned away, realizing the helplessness of her mission. She started to her horse.

Behind her a boot crunched on gravel. A hand caught her arm, to swing her about.

"You really care that much about these people, girl, to get them through. Enough so that you yourself would be branded outlaw—as I am?" muttered Brady. "The odds are a hundred to one against us. Worse. There's no chance. But it's never been a disgrace to a man to go down fighting for a cause like this."

And something like exaltation swept into his voice, as if he pictured that epic struggle ahead. He laughed grimly. "God, girl, you'd be getting us into a mess! Worse than a dozen traps like those at the Camas hotel. I can't answer for my neighbors, but I'll put it up to them. Then if I have to, I'll go with you alone."

"Brady!" she exclaimed. She swayed a little toward him. And all the strange power that this man had possessed over her since their first meeting in Camas returned full force. She read in Brady Burgess more than a mere fighter; a man who would fight for others in a lost cause.

Starry-eyed, she watched his broad back as he strode toward one of the cabins and disappeared within it. Then she heard his voice, speaking evenly, putting the situation before them. There was a silence when he had done. A little later Brady appeared in the doorway, carrying his rifle and slicker roll. He headed for the corral alone.

Then a man appeared in the doorway, a jaunty young fellow, and he also carried a rifle and a slicker roll. He followed Brady to the corral, and behind him came another man, an oldish, whiskered puncher, then another and another. Eight men, she counted, all with rifles, following Brady to the corral to saddle their horses.

Loops went out to fall over the heads of horses; saddles and blankets rose to the backs of the mounts. They lined up, and then Brady came riding toward her. Her heart swelled at sight of that brave company. Ten men, counting Brady, and the oldish puncher who had brought her and Al Brannigan here. Brady drew up near her and put up his hand in a salute.

"Enlisting for trouble, miss," he said. "You go back to camp. I think we can just about ride to where your horses were taken. We may show up at your camp with the horses, and we might not, but either way you'll probably be hearing news about us."

Rita Quest returned the salute. "Just to make sure I get that news straight," she said, "I'm riding with you, buckaroo. You said that it would be riding through the gates of hell to help the settlers: Al Brannigan and I might be able to help you bust those gates in . . ."

THERE seemed no doubt in the mind of Brady Burgess as to the destination of the stolen horses. They rode toward the mountain range north of the Caballos, where Desbro had told her Lin Gentry, Sheriff Wallis's brother-in-law, had his ranch.

They headed finally through the pleasant rolling country of the Gentry range, and came at dusk to a low brushy ridge from which they looked down on a little ranch near the water of a big *crenaga*, or lake. Horses were grazing back from the water. The girl gasped as she identified the

mounts as those that had pulled the pilgrims toward Valle Verde.

The cabin was only a small rock shack, one of Gentry's camps, Brady said. Eight or nine men were outside, eating roundup wagon style, sitting on the ground. Among them Rita made out the big figure of Lee Desbro.

"If we rush 'em, they'll make it inside that house," remarked Brady. "Holed up there, they'd deal us a lot of misery."

"You want to keep them from going into that house when you start your rush?" asked Rita. "Is there a bolt on the door inside, do you know?"

"Yes. Happens there's a bar that drops into a slot. The wife of a puncher who lived there once had it put on. Why?"

Rita laughed. "I owe Desbro quite a lot. I'd like to pay part of it back with a surprise. Supposing I ride on down, pretending to suspect nothing, and jump inside and shut that door while you men make your charge. Just before I shut the door, I could stand in the doorway and take my sombrero off as signal to you to start your fireworks."

"It's a great idea," said Brady. "But, young lady, it has one drawback—it's too risky for you."

"That the only objection?" she flashed back at him.

"The one and only," he said. "Hey, where are you—"

For the girl had left them, riding boldly out of the cedar fringe which hid them from the men squatted before the little house.

She got half way down the slope before the men at the cabin saw her. They went for their guns, and then seeing it was only a girl, they stood watching her.

Lee Desbro had stepped out in front of the group. By the time she reached him, she guessed that he would have a plausible story for her. The cook wearing a flour-sack apron, came out to join the rest. Which was good. That meant the little rock house was empty.

"Well, for heaven's sake, where did you come from?" Desbro asked as she swung down before him. "You tracked the horses over here, eh?"

"That's it," she said, smiling at him. "Did you have to fight to get them back from Brady's bunch, Lee?"

"A little brush," said Lee Desbro easily. "Brady's gang folded their tails and run when we come on 'em. You sorta made me proddy by what you said back in camp, and we started out at daylight and kept the trail. You're alone, of course?" he asked.

"You can see that for yourself," she evaded. "I could kiss you, Lee Desbro, for getting back those horses." That was added out of pure devilment. She would show him that she could act a part also.

"Chuck and coffee on that stove inside, I guess," she said casually. "I'm hungry. No, don't bother. I'll go in and help myself."

CALMLY she stepped into the doorway, and stood there for a moment, raising her sombrero from her coppery hair. That was the signal for Brady to start his rush.

Instantly yips came from the top of the slope, and there was a pound of hoofs and a line of men swept out of the cedars.

And with that she leaped inside the house. Hastily she slammed shut the door, and shot the bar down into its slot, locking the men outside.

Standing behind the door, gun in hand, she heard the surprised yelp of a man as he tried the door and found it barred. And then Desbro's snarling voice, "She tricked us, by God! Run—that's Brady's bunch comin'!"

The drumming hoofs sounded louder and the guns opened up, Brady's men were firing as they came.

Two saddled horses had been standing near the house. Rita, through the small window, saw the owner of one horse jump for the bridle reins. She fired through the open window, and the man yelled and held up his hand, looking in amazement at the house. Then seeing Rita in the window, he lifted his gun, just as a rifle shot from one of the charging horsemen hit the man in the shoulder and spun him around.

The rest were in full flight, making no attempt to stop Brady's charge. Rita flung open the door and stepped out. Rifle fire crackled in the dusk. A couple of men at the corral went down as they swung on the bare backs of mounts. Only those heading for the brush had a chance.

Then it was all over. Three men had escaped, two on foot, Desbro on horseback.

The guns silenced and Brady Burgess pounded up to the house. He flung himself from the saddle and looked at Rita closely to make sure she had not been hurt.

"Look here," he scolded, "that was too damn dangerous. You little fool, you almost got—"

She laughed. "It worked, didn't it?"

"It worked," he admitted, and his face was drawn and white. "But you ran too big a risk. Leave that to us men."

Looking at Brady, so solicitous for her safety, offering his life to help strangers, a lump came to the girl's throat. Could she risk his life in a hopeless gamble—the one man whose death would mean the death of all hope for her?

"Brady," she cried suddenly, "we can't go on with this. This is only the start. You'll be killed. I'll never have you." And she was weeping suddenly, with her head pillowed against his shoulder. His arms came about her.

"Rita," he said gently, "we're in it to the end. If we can help those people of yours lick Holloman and Desbro and Wallis, all the risk is worth it. We gave our word: we'll stick, come hell and high water!"

The girl lifted her head, her eyes bright with tears and drew a long breath. "Brady, we've got a chance, haven't we?" she whispered. "A long chance—to win?"

"Yes," he answered in a low voice. "If we once get those people off the desert and into the valley, they can fort up in that big old house Holloman had as ranch headquarters. It will take them four or five days to drive to the Valle. We've got to do it in less. We've got to kill the horses, half-kill ourselves, to win that race to the Valle. And kill the mangy pack of coyotes that will try to head us off. We'll drive these horses back tonight and head out tomorrow morning. We got to hurry. Got to run and fight. Run and fight . . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

Outlaw Race

FROM the moment that their horses were returned to the pilgrim's camp, a new spirit came into the caravan of Valle Verde settlers. The men gathered about Rita Quest, after the horse herd had been penned in a rope corral, and she told them straight-forwardly what she knew.

She told them that Brady Burgess had been an ogre created to act as scapegoat when their horses had been run off. That she and Al Brannigan had suspected it after the raid, and had ridden to the Caballos to appeal to the outlaw and his neighbors to help. That they had found the horses on the ranch of Lin Gentry, Wallis's brother-in-law, and had caught Lee Desbro calmly eating supper with the man that had run them off.

Finally she told them bluntly of the odds they faced; that their only chance was to

race to Valle Verde ahead of the army of gunfighters that Desbro and Sheriff Wallis would send to stop them. They'd all have to fight as they fled, with the help of Brady Burgess and his neighbor volunteers.

A man named Blanding, unofficial leader of the colonists, rancher and farmer, stepped out from the crowd. "I never did like that Desbro and Holloman," he stated. "Hollman was whining because he claimed we had bought the Valle too cheap. If we have to fight to get the Valle, we'll fight. I think I can speak for every man in the train."

An approving murmur came from the men. "But we don't ask strangers to fight for us," went on Blanding. "We could use their help, but it's askin' too plumb much. By finding our horses you've done more than we can ever pay back."

Brady Burgess looked at the pilgrim, and he liked what he saw. He grinned and stepped forward. "You wouldn't," said Brady, "cheat us out of a chance to get back at a polecat outfit that's run us off our ranches? We're with you, Blanding—to the finish!"

His hand came out to take Blanding's. And the hand of a fighting man gripped the hand of another fighting man.

They gave Brady Burgess, outlaw, complete charge, and if they had once considered Lee Desbro a good wagon train captain, they were to change their standards. While they waited to rest their horses and to move out at midnight, Brady decided first to lighten the load of the wagons, to strip them down to the barest essentials, leaving behind the bulkier articles to be brought on later. This would be a race: it might end in weary, jaded horses being whipped to the finish at the Valle Verde fortress-like ranch-house. A race with death.

There was one more thing that they could do. The minister who accompanied the colonists had been raised, as a boy in the East, the neighbor to the present governor of the newly-made state. It was agreed that he should ride to the nearest railroad point, dodging Camas, and telegraph the governor, putting before him their desperate situation.

Before the minister rode away, standing in the middle of the camp he delivered a brief prayer. Many of the people dropped to their knees; the rest stood with bowed heads. Phrases of the preacher's words came to Rita Quest as she stood on the outskirts of the crowd with Brady Burgess. Simply, solemnly, with utmost faith, the minister concluded: "For Your children who have come here seeking a place where we may build homes, we pray Your guidance, Your help. Give us fortitude to meet what disasters may come, strength to resist tyranny, courage to battle unto death the forces of evil. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen."

Rita's small hand slipped into Brady's big one. He had listened, his head bared, and by the leaping flames of the big camp fire, Rita saw in his eyes reverence, respect, and a solemn promise that Brady Burgess, outlaw, and wanted killer, would do his utmost for these people.

With her hands on his shoulders, she stood close to him, her coppery hair touching his wool shirt. "Brady," she said, "I love you more than I ever thought I could love a man. You'll win, Brady. That minister is right; there is—Someone who will help us."

His arms closed about her, and by their sheer strength he instilled confidence in Rita Quest. "It's mighty hard to lick anyone who won't admit he's licked," said Brady Burgess. "Judging these people by that 'Trust in God and keep your powder dry' prayer, I don't think that they'll even admit they're through."

Her answer didn't need words . . . .

OF that wild flight across the miles of desert to Valle Verde, there was to be left to Rita Quest many nightmare memories. Visions of wagons creaking out in the starlight to the music of popping whips, driven by grim-faced men whose rifles were always close. Of Brady Burgess' neighbors riding as rear guard. Of days and nights as the train rumbled across the barren land to the Valle Verde, always hurrying. Of Brady Burgess galloping along the column of moving wagons, with a sharp eye on the hard-driven horses and a cheery word for the people huddled on the driver seats. Of clouds of curling dust, and the bawling of the cattle, pushed hard by Al Brannigan to keep up with the fast pace of the wagons.

In the afternoon of the first day, as they rested in the camp intending to move out again at midnight, the dust cloud of a bunch of horsemen arose behind them, traveling fast. Brady, estimating the number from the size of the dust cloud, did not seem disturbed. This was only a preliminary force, not the main body of the army that would come. He passed a few quiet orders to Blanding and the rest of the settlers, and calmly finished his meal.

Fifteen men were in the party led by Sheriff Wallis that rode through the circle of wagons. Coming straight from Camas after the arrival of the messenger that Desbro had sent the night of the horse raid, Wallis had passed far west of the Gentry ranch and was unaware that Desbro's treachery had been exposed.

Sheriff Wallis stiffened in his saddle as a group of men moved out from behind a wagon. It was Brady Burgess with his Caballos neighbors, all carrying rifles. A full half minute the sheriff sat speechless. Then, "That man is a outlaw!" he boomed. "He's Brady Burgess—wanted for murderin' Bob Quest. You sure ain't travelin' along with him? Hell, there's three thousand reward on his head."

Rita Quest stepped forward. "Tell Mister Holloman that the niece of Bob Quest says he can withdraw that reward. You've fooled us plenty, Wallis; you and Desbro and Holloman, but you're fooling us no longer."

Wallis growled in his throat. An unexpected turn, this. The stolen horses recovered, and Brady Burgess journeying with the colonists.

"Yuh pack of damn fools!" he bellowed. "Don't yuh know you're harborin' the worst killer in this country?"

"We'll stick by him as he's stuck by us, said Blanding quietly. And Wallis realized that he could not shake the firm belief of these settlers in their ally.

"Whether yuh believe it or not," Sheriff Wallis declared, "I'm orderin' yuh to camp right here until this is cleared up, savvy? This outfit don't go no fu'ther!"

Blanding nodded at Brady Burgess. "There's our boss—the man that talks for us, Wallis."

"That bein' the case," said Burgess, "I'm handin' yuh an order, Wallis. Short and sweet. Hit the trail!"

The sheriff's hand fell to his belt gun, and the rifles in the hands of Brady and his men lifted. Plainly the Caballos men welcomed battle, and the sheriff realized that with the combination of the pilgrims and Brady's neighbors, his posse would be wiped out. His voice rose hoarsely, "I'll bring fifty men, a hundred, to blast this whole outfit to pieces. We'll leave yuh all—men, women and kids—layin' out for the buzzards. Yuh heard of the Mountain Meadow Massacre? I'll pull another one here, savvy? I'm givin' yuh one last chance, Blanding, to give up Burgess. What yuh say?"

"I'll see you in hell first," returned Blanding with quiet emphasis. And Sheriff Wallis and his men turned to ride away.

RITA QUEST moved swiftly to the side of Brady Burgess. "If they were only set afoot," she suggested.

"Smart girl," muttered Brady Burgess instantly. "We'll do that. It means the few hours we need to win the race.

"Wait, Wallis!" he called, his voice like a whiplash, and the sheriff, stopping his horse, turned in his saddle. "Just one thing before you go," went on Brady. "You declared war on us; we're declarin' it right back, only we start it now. Wallis, you yellow-livered hound, we can use those horses and the time you'll lose by walking. Climb down off your saddles."

Settin' us afoot?" growled the sheriff. "We'll fight first."

"Your bet is covered," snapped Brady. He began walking toward the sheriff, his rifle close to his shoulder. "But the first move any of you make for a gun, Wallis, I'm knocking you out of that saddle. Make your choice, and make it quick."

The sheriff knew he and his posse was hopelessly outnumbered. "You top my hand," he growled, "but, Brady, by God, I'm going to have the fun of hangin' yuh for this. There won't be no bullet for you. You'll be wearin' a greasy rope around yore neck, and dancin' on air!"

Snarling, he got down, and made no protest when the guns and ammunition of his party were also commandeered. They were given a few canteens of water, a little food, and sent on their way. . . .

At midnight the wagon train moved on, hurrying along under the stars, putting behind it weary miles. By noon the next day, the strain was showing on both horses and drivers when they halted again to rest until night. Over them, as they moved through choking dust clouds, the sun was a molten ball. Babies cried fretfully, but men and women and older children had gone on in grim silence, trudging beside the teams, in order to lessen the drag against sweaty collars. Horses were gaunt in spite of the heavy feedings of grain. But ahead of them was Valle Verde, and the big ranch-house that would serve as fort.

At dusk they pulled out again, a ghostly caravan crawling between the ghostly stalks of cactus to the accompaniment of hoarse shouts and muffled rumble of wheels. During the night a few horses played out and three wagons had to be abandoned. Dawn, came, with scarlet streamers of cloud, while behind them an omnious snake of yellow dust was raised by many riders. It marked the army from Camas, pounding after them at top speed.

Brady Burgess squinted at the dust cloud while the sun rolled up, and then he turned toward a spire of rock that marked the beginning of Valle Verde, and a mile beyond it, the big ranch-house. "Push on!" he ordered. "It's going to be a fight. Blanding, pick ten men to stay with my bunch; we'll mount them on the sheriff's horses. You drivers, keep those wagons moving, no matter what happens back of you."

Al Brannigan, leaving the cattle with three of the older boys, joined the fighters. Blanding rapidly chose his men. Women would take their places on the drivers' seats.

The wagons rolled on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Renegade's Last Dawn

THE country became broken; the smooth crust of desert was pierced by black jagged rock splinters and sharkfin ridges. Over an old road leading to the ranch-house the wagons jolted heavily, struggling to cover the few remaining miles that stretched to their haven.

Behind them after a time, Rita heard the distant crackling fire of rifles, which mounted rapidly in volume. Brady would hold off the sheriff's men as long as he

could, then retreat to a place of ambuscade. The gun explosions became a roar that hammered on the still, hot morning air.

Behind them, as they fled, the battle boomed on, and sank after a while to a steady interchange of shots. Brady would be falling back to take another stand. When he again faced the Camas men, the guns would become a thunder.

The lead wagons topped a little rise, and Rita spurred her horse up a rocky bench to the side of the road. Ahead, below them, were the brown adobe walls of the big ranch-house, built in old Indian days, presenting a safe refuge, once they reached it.

Back of them, she saw a broad river of dust, and through it dimly the figures of horsemen on racing horses. She swept up the pair of glasses that she had used on her mountain ranch, and brought them into focus, first on Brady's men falling back before a long line of riders that seemed to be an army. She saw Brady himself, throw his rifle to his shoulder, empty it, then retreat. Desperately behind him the Camas warriors fanned out, trying to get past that stubborn little rear guard, eager to get at the wagons, to pile up teams, and keep the pilgrims from reaching the shelter of adobe walls.

Among the pursuing men she identified big Lee Desbro in a black shirt. As she watched, she saw him fall far back with a score of men, to turn to the east. She guessed his intention. He would circle at top speed, and cut in ahead of the wagons. Then he would either strike there or get to the ranch-house. In the dust and stress of the battle, Brady was unable to see this maneuver. Unopposed, Desbro would come into a shallow canyon that led almost to the ranch and sweep along it to strike the head of the line of wagons.

Recklessly Rita flung her sorrel mount down the slope. "I want ten men," she cried above the rumbling wheels, "to ride into the canyon and stop a bunch that will be coming up there. Men who can shoot."

Rapidly she rode along the wagons, collecting ten, mounting them bareback on loose horses. Behind her saddle she took a fifteen-year-old boy who was counted the best shot among the colonists. Then at the head of her small force, she galloped past the wagons and swung sharply to the right. Behind her the drivers gathered themselves for one last effort, whipping on the jaded horses in a wild flight for the brown walls. A half mile, and Rita's party were on the canyon rim. As they glanced down it, they saw Desbro with his men, far below, spurring their horses at top speed.

THEY still speak of the fight that Rita Quest made in the small canyon below Valle Verde ranch, against the wolves sent out from Camas.

When the two lines of riders were a half mile apart, the rifles began to trade shots. Instantly Rita pulled up to dismount her little group, to spread them across the canyon bottom, behind cover.

Desbro, disdaining to take shelter, came on, hoping with one rush to smash through that little line. As the first rifles crashed out, two saddles of the charging horsemen emptied, and a horse went down. Still they continued their advance, three hundred yards away, thundering nearer. Again the rifles spoke, swept three men from saddles, sending down two horses.

Desbro, cursing, dismounted his force and began crawling up the canyon, using available rocks and brush as cover. Rita flung a look behind her. The wagons were a mile from the ranch, jaded horses on a trot, pulling the vehicles down grade.

Behind Desbro's group, a second bunch of Camas horsemen thundered up the canyon. The rest had been left to fight Brady.

It was all over; it was the end. Her

handful couldn't keep back all those men. Maybe, Rita thought as she reloaded in desperate speed, Brady would hear the shots and come to their rescue.

AT HER side the fifteen-year-old boy she had brought behind her saddle gave a groan. Blood was soaking the sleeve of an arm, and his face puckered up as if he were about to cry. And then his teeth gritted and he shoved his rifle barrel back over the rock, forcing the wounded arm to support it.

"Got to stop' em," he gasped.

"Stop 'em," echoed Rita, but she was sick. It was over; they had lost the race. Nearer and nearer thudded the second group of riders, and now Desbro's dismounted men were running through the brush, advancing recklessly.

From the rim of the canyon behind them came the click of shod hoofs. She looked up, and in her excitement she almost stood up to certain death. Pouring over the rim, coming full tilt, was another line of horsemen, Brady in the lead, Blanding and Al Brannigan following with a dozen others.

A yell split their throats, the savage yell of fighting men, and then they plummeted down the slope, crashing through the brush, riding full tilt at Desbro's dismounted men and the riders behind them. They struck the Camas force with guns flaming, flinging their horses dauntlessly at a body of men that outnumbered them four to one.

They met in a great smother of dust, out of which came the loud blasts of the guns, the fierce yells of men, the shrill cry of a wounded horse. And then out of the dust, down canyon in full flight, went the Camas warriors, mounted men and men afoot alike, fleeing out of that inferno in wild panic, unwilling to meet the assault of men who cared not whether they lived or died, but cared just then only to kill.

She saw Desbro catch a loose horse, pull himself into the saddle, and she half raised her rifle to shoot, but she could not. The pain-wracked boy beside her had no such scruples. Carefully he lined up the black shirt in his sights, and squeezed the trigger. Desbro flung up his arms, fell from the horse. When Rita turned back to the boy, she found he had fainted.

THEY had won, but she had lost, Rita Quest realized the next morning at dawn, when Brady Burgess and the men left of his Caballos group prepared to ride. Two from Brady's group had been killed; two others, wounded, were to remain with the settlers, to be cared for until they were able to ride far away. Although Wallis would not dare bother the colonists, there would be prices on the heads of the Caballo ranchers who had helped them.

The settlers of the Valle Verde crowded about the little group, the men shaking their hands, the women weeping for the outlaws who had offered their lives for strangers.

Rita Quest hurried to saddle a horse and lead him straight back to Brady. The girl's eyes were misty, but her chin was set at a determined angle.

"I'm going with you, Brady," she announced. "Wherever you go."

He looked down at her gravely and took her hands. Then he shook his head slowly.

"You can't," he said. "God knows if there was any way to take you, I'd do it. But where I'm going, I'd ask no woman to go, least of all you. I'm branded outlaw in letters six feet high. All the rest of my life I'll be a hunted wolf, on the dodge, fighting, denning up a while, running again. Holloman and Wallis will never forget."

"Wherever you go," Rita repeated, "I'll

go with you. Hiding or running, or fighting. Brady, what is all that? I love you. They can't cheat me of you by running the outlaw brand on you."

His arms, hungry for her, folded her close, but there was no altering his determination. And Rita began weeping then, helplessly, knowing that on this decision Brady Burgess would stand, because he loved her too much to share with her his bitter life of a killer, an outlaw.

The sun was rolling up over the Valle Verde which some day, thanks to Brady Burgess, would be dotted with peaceful ranches and houses. Along the path of its slanting light came a rider at full gallop who shouted as he saw the group by the ranch-house anad spurred his tired horse. It was the minister.

He pulled up, drooping in his saddle, raised his hand. "I telegraphed the governor," he told them, "and he hurried down the head of his rangers, Adjutant-General Whitby. We had a long talk yesterday. He's following with half a dozen rangers. They've known about Holloman and Wallis, and have been waiting for a chance to clamp down on them. This is it. The governor is removing Wallis and the rangers are in charge."

He turned to Brady. "And I told them of a man, a hunted man with a price on his head who volunteered to help us. You will come clear, Brady Burgess; I have the governor's promise on that. You all can go back to your ranches."

Rita Quest gave a low cry. Brady looked at her, and then, for those two, all the people about them, the ranch-house and the camp faded. He swept her in his arms and lifted her lightly to his saddle. The horse started off on its own accord, out into the sunlit valley. They didn't care where; they had to be alone.

Rita, with Brady's arm about her as he walked beside the horse, felt like shouting, felt like singing with gratitude, happiness. Brady Burgess would be a hunted man no longer. His life was no longer forfeit; it would belong to her. Always.

Out of sight of the house, she slipped from the saddle to give herself into his arms. She stayed there, with her heart pounding against his.

"A long chance," she murmured dreamily. "A fighting chance. We've won, Brady; you and I, my dearest. . . ."

"You and I," he repeated solemnly. "It will always be—you and I, living, winning through together. . . ."

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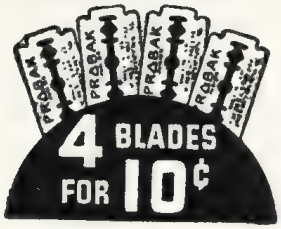

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Anne wanted to love the man who was careful and cautious, the power in the community. . . . Yet her heart chose Steve Fargo, drifter and gambler; a man whose only security was the laughter in his reckless eyes, the strength of his strong young arms. . . .

SHE was slim and lithe, with candid blue eyes and soft yellow hair. She wore high-heeled boots, faded jeans and a man's shirt open at the throat. As she finished making her meagre purchases at the counter of Jackson's General Store and crossed the dusky room to the door, she moved with the long easy stride of a boy.

In the doorway she paused abruptly,

suddenly startled. She saw both men at the same instant. Lew Banner, tall and lean, had just come out of the Cattleman's Bank across the street. Ducking under the hitch rack, he put one foot in the stirrup of his waiting roan. Simultaneously Jan Maddock materialized from a shadowed doorway on the same side of the street as the girl. Stepping off the sidewalk, one huge hand hovering beside his holstered gun, Maddock fixed his heavy stare on Lew Banner's back.

Anne Wheaton cried out sharply, instinctively: "Lew! Look out!"

Lew Banner spun back from his horse. Half-whirling, he faced Maddock. Maddock reared. He whipped an angry glance at the girl, then gazed back at Banner. His voice boomed through hot stillness: "Figuring to get out of town without meeting me, eh?"

"I didn't know you were in town," Lew Banner returned.

Maddock laughed. "You've been dodging me for weeks," he accused. "That valley's no longer big enough to hold us both! You won't get out, and neither will I. That leaves just one answer, Banner!"

"I won't make a fight," Lew said.

"You don't have to make it!" thundered Maddock. *"I'm* making it! You hear? Now go for your gun!"

For a tense instant both men crouched motionless, staring at each other. The silence between them seemed to tighten subtly, to swell like a gaseous poison between those two rows of bleak, false-fronted buildings, seemed about to burst wide open in a sudden and thunderous detonation of death. And then, almost mockingly, Lew Banner smiled. Very slowly he spread both hands out from his sides, slowly lifted them above his head.

"My hands are up," he warned flatly. "If you killed me on an even break, nothing much would happen to you. But now my hands are up. Shoot me now and it's murder. You'd likely hang."

Jan Maddock blinked with stunned rage. "Why!" he exploded. "Why—why you dang yellow-bellied rabbit!"

Lew Banner's rugged face went faintly gray. But he made no aggressive move. Slowly he turned to his horse. Keeping his right hand elevated, he placed his left on the saddle pommel, swung smoothly aboard the roan. He wheeled the horse deliberately, rode up the dusty street and out of town.

Maddock watched him out of sight. He cursed with a low, searing violence. Then he looked at Anne Wheaton who was still standing tensely in the store doorway. Anne felt his gaze sweeping over her like a calloused hand and drew instinctively back. She heard his snarling laugh.

"Young woman," he said, "you'd have done better to mind your own business!"

He swayed around, clumped ponderously up the wooden sidewalk, vanished through the swinging doors of the Golden Age Saloon. Behind Anne a couple of cowboys, and old Joe Jackson, owner of the store, had crowded close, watching that brief scene in the dusty street. One of the cowboys laughed contemptuously.

"Seems like Lew was plumb scared," he observed.

"Either that," amended the storekeeper, "or else he's all-fired cautious!"

Anne Wheaton whirled, blue eyes flashing. "Lew Banner," she sharply defended, "is not a coward! But neither does he believe in useless bloodshed! There was no sense in his risking his life just because Jan Maddock wanted him to."

The cowboy grinned sheepishly. "Yes, ma'am," he said. "Yes, ma'am."

Old Joe Jackson, however, shook his head soberly. "Just the same, Miss Anne," he said, "I figure Lew is making a mistake. I allow he played it the way he thought best, but Maddock ain't to be

stopped. He aims to get that spread of Lew's, and Lew's either got to meet him or quit the country. It may be foolish, and it may be wrong, but it's in the cards. Ain't nothing going to change that either."

A FEW minutes later Anne Wheaton mounted her slim palomino and left town. She rode across the vast, sage-mottled plain, five miles west to that forlorn homestead, where, alone, she had been making so bitter a struggle for existence this long last year since herfather's death. As she swung to ground at the pole corral she saw Lew Banner's roan standing with trailing reins under the old cottonwood beside her bleak, unpainted cabin. Lew rose from the step, came down and unsaddled Anne's horse. He turned it into the corral and they walked back to the cabin together. Lew sat on the step beside her.

"Well," he asked, "did I play it wrong?"

"Of course not," Anne said. "You simply used your head."

"Most folks'll be saying I was scared. But you don't think so, Anne?"

"No, Lew."

He turned and looked at her, smiling quizzically now. "Anne, how much longer have I got to wait?"

The girl sighed. She stood up quickly, walked a few nervous steps. He followed her, placed a firm hand on her warm shoulder, lifted her chin with a crooked finger so that she was forced to meet his steady gaze.

"I can make you happy, girl," he promised. "I've got a big ranch, money in the bank, a nice house. You've been slaving here for a year trying to make both ends meet. You'd never have to worry again, if you married me."

"I know, Lew. Only—"

He studied her an instant, then asked: "Is it Steve Fargo, Anne?"

"I don't honestly know, Lew. Steve is so—so—"

He nodded. "Has Steve asked you to marry him?"

"Not in so many words. But—"

"Steve Fargo," said Lew, "is all right. I don't aim to run him down. But Steve is a drifter, Anne, and he'll always be a drifter. He's a gambler at heart, ready to risk his last penny on the turn of a card, wild, reckless! Marry him and you'll never know a minute of security as long as you live. All I'm asking is that you stack us up, one against the other, and when you make your choice just use your head a little."

"What about using my heart?" Anne asked.

Lew Banner winced slightly. "What about breaking your heart?" he countered.

Anne turned sharply away, a half sob catching in her throat. "Oh, I know, Lew. But I can't answer you yet. I want to—to be sure. Please, Lew, just give me a little more time."

He patted her shoulder. "As long as you ever want, Anne. Only keep it in mind, whenever you decide, I'll be waiting."

He walked over and mounted his horse, a tall and dependable figure, rode slowly north across the vast, shimmering range. Anne watched him go, watched until he grew small with distance.

ANNE WHEATON had just finished washing her supper dishes early that next evening when young Steve Fargo rode up to her homestead. He came in, hung his sombrero on a peg beside the door, sat down, and watched her with twinkling eyes as he started to roll a cigarette.

"How's the little cattle queen?"

Anne laughed and took a chair beside him. "Cattle Queen!" she said. "I start-

ed out with six cows a year ago. One was stolen, three died, I had to butcher the fifth, and last week the sixth broke out of the pasture and I can't find hide or hair of him!"

"Her," Steve mildly corrected.

"Him or her," Anne shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Beef is beef."

"First thing in the morning," Steve promised, "I'll set out and see if I can round up your lost ranch."

"Were you in town day before yesterday?" Anne asked.

Steve looked up sharply. "No," he said, "but I heard what happened."

"Do you blame Lew Banner, Steve?"

Steve didn't look at her. He said, "Why, no. Anyway, it's none of my business."

"But *you* would have done different," Anne insisted.

"Likely," Steve nodded. "But that doesn't mean anything. According to my way of looking at it, I'd of been right; but Lew, he was right, too, according to *his* way of looking at it."

Anne sighed. "Lew Banner," she stated bluntly, "wants me to marry him."

Steve looked startled. "Huh," he said. "Why—did you tell him you would, Anne?"

Anne shook her head. "Not yet. I told him I wanted a little time to think it over."

Steve Fargo crushed out his cigarette. He looked at Anne and grinned. "In that case," he said, "I reckon it's time I spoke my own piece. I haven't got much alongside of Lew Banner. But I love you, Anne. I'd go to hell for you."

Anne gazed at him, her blue eyes faintly constricted, a little frightened. "You're asking me to marry you, Steve?"

"Why, sure," he said.

Anne stood up and walked to the window. For a long time she was silent there, listening to the faraway wail of a coyote, staring out at the black and lonely rangeland night—and remembering—remembering the drifter her father had been, remembering her own bitter childhood, drifting from mining camp to cow camp, living in a creaking wagon bed, shivering beside smoky campfires, the rain beating down on her huddled form, remembering her father tall and handsome and laughing, so much like Steve Fargo, following the rainbow always, always restless, always seeking the pot of gold.

She turned suddenly, facing that tall cowboy. "Steve," she faltered, "I—I suppose it's either you or Lew. But I don't know. I—"

Steve stood up, smiling. He said: "I reckon Lew has a lot to offer. He has stock and a ranch and money. Why, he has a house with ten rooms! I guess the girl who married him wouldn't have much to worry about."

A PULSE beat wildly in Anne's throat, like a frightened bird in a cage. She stared at Steve, at his broad shoulders and flat hips, the bold poise of his head and the dark laughter of his eyes. "And you, Steve?" she asked. Suddenly her voice was bitter. "What have *you* to offer?"

"Just this," he said, and with a reckless laugh he stepped swiftly forward, sweeping her slim body into his strong arms, crushing her against him, his lips catching and clinging to hers as though the dark fire of his eyes poured through her, tingling every nerve, lifting her into an infinity of singing space. She tried to struggle, then went limp and breathless against him. After a long moment he stepped back. He said, sober enough now:

"Can anything else count, Anne?"

She clung to him, buried her face against his solid chest. "Oh, Steve," she murmured. "I *do* love you. I've known it all along. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it."

He stroked her yellow hair gently. "And you'll marry me?"

She stepped back now, seeking calm, regarding him intently. "I'll marry you, Steve, but only on one condition."

"I'll do it!" he said. "What is it?"

"Your homestead is not much bigger than mine," she stated. "You have only a few head of cattle. But it's a start, Steve. A start toward a home. That means so much to me. You must promise me that you'll never give it up, that together we'll make a home of it. Promise that you'll never sell it, never, never drift, never gamble with our lives."

He looked suddenly bewildered. "Why, Anne," he said. "I—"

Her gaze widened. "Steve! You mean you won't promise even that?"

"But, Anne, that homestead isn't worth a thousand dollars. I—"

She stared at him. Suddenly she stamped her foot, her blue eyes flashing a tempestuous anger. "Steve Fargo, it's little enough I'm asking! Either you make me that promise, right now, or I'll never see you again! I mean it!"

He shrugged with a faint weariness. "But, Anne, I can't promise that."

"You *can't?* Why not?"

"Because I've already sold out my claim in the homestead. Sold it yesterday. That's what I came over to tell you about." Excitement came into his voice, eagerness, pleading: "You see, Anne, Dave Landon came to me the other day. He's got a fine gold prospect up in the mountains north of here, and he offered to let me in on it. He needs a little money. His wife's been sick. I felt sorry for him, and anyway, it looked like a fine gamble. Why, it might make us rich!"

"Rich!" Suddenly Anne Wheaton was laughing hysterically. "Lew was right. You'll never change, Steve. You're a born gambler. I knew it all the time. But I wouldn't admit it. I'm a fool and blind. Maybe you've broken my heart, but at least you won't break my body. Please go, Steve."

He stared at her. "But look, Anne. I was only thinking of you, of what it would mean for you if I struck it rich. Some day, I will strike it rich! Why—"

"Don't, Steve."

"But, Anne—"

"Please go, Steve."

He stiffened suddenly. "Why sure, Anne. Of course." He picked up his sombrero and left the cabin.

ANNE WHEATON had made up her mind. She no longer had any illusions left. She was taking Lew Banner's advice now, forgetting the heart and using the head. Early that next afternoon she saddled her palomino and rode across the heat-hazed range to Lew's big spread.

She found him alone. Talking casually for the moment, they went up on the porch of the huge ramshackle house, sat there in two old rocking chairs looking out across the rolling leagues of yellow grass, the grazing cattle, to distant purple mountains. Lew's range, Lew's cattle, Lew's mountains. A man who got what he wanted and held it. A man as safe and sound and dependable as solid rock.

Almost as though he read her thoughts his gaze followed hers, across those spreading leagues of land, confidently, with an almost passionate satisfaction. It came to her suddenly that land, possessions, meant more to this man than anything else on earth. He would never lose that land; the woman who was his wife could sleep easily, without fear. She looked back at his rugged face, smiled a little crookedly.

"You know why I've come, Lew?"

He studied her. "I think I do, Anne. I hope so."

"I've made up my mind, Lew. Whenever you want to marry me, I want to marry you. I'm tired, Lew, so tired. I

want only to know you're close, taking care of things, looking out for me."

He laughed and sprang to his feet, caught her hands, drawing her up to face him. "You'll never be sorry, Anne! I'll make you happy!" He bent toward her.

She held him away, one small hand against his chest. "I want to be fair, Lew. I don't know so much about—well, what they call love. I only know that you are safe and dependable. I'll be your wife in every way. All that I have to give you, I'll give gladly. I don't know whether it is enough."

"It's all there is," he said, and drew her into his arms.

She felt his lips crush hers into a taut line, felt the hard pressure of his hand against the pliant curve of her back. Then she was a little bewildered. She tried, not very well, to return his kiss. Nothing in his embrace was repulsive; simply it was empty, like shaking hands with a stranger. A queer numbness spread through her, a sense of failure and defeat, of tremendous loss. Her face burned suddenly, as she remembered unwillingly the wild fire, the singing through space, that had swept her up last night in that brief, mad moment when she had gone limp and breathless in the arms of young Steve Fargo. . . .

Lew Banner stepped back. He smiled his happiness, as he saw the lovely flush mount through her cheeks, believing that he had brought it there. Anne spoke quickly, almost fearfully:

"If—if we're going to be married, we'd better do it soon. I mean—"

"A week from today," he suggested.

She nodded swiftly, somehow desperately. "Yes! A week from today."

THE news of Anne's forthcoming marriage spread rapidly during the following week. She half expected that Steve Fargo would come to her, would try once more to sweep her off her feet as he had done that night last week. But the days slipped by and she saw nothing more of Steve. A little bitterly she decided that he had already put her out of mind and had followed his will-o-the-wisp mine into the northern mountains.

She worried occasionally over Lew, remembered the bitter enmity between Lew and Jan Maddock. But Lew, she decided, could take care of himself. He was cautious, wary, immune to any trap.

The day before her marriage arrived at last, and she made her final preparations. Desperately she tried to be elated, happy, to convince herself that her choice was wise and sensible. Her head told her that she was happy, and her heart listened and wept.

She went to bed early, and for a long time lay in the sage-tanged dark unable to sleep. She thought of tomorrow—tomorrow night, alone with Lew Banner in that big ranch house, safe, her life decided, nothing more to worry about. Nothing more? She thought again of Steve and forced herself to remember him calmly. She was a little angry because tears came into her eyes, and because she whispered aloud, unwillingly:

"Good-bye."

She fell at last into a fitful sleep. How long she slept she didn't know. But suddenly she was wide awake, sitting upright in bed, her hand against her thumping heart. She heard not a sound in the dark cabin, and yet she *knew* that she was no longer alone.

She strained her ears against the silence. Quietly she slid over the edge of the bed. The floor was cold against her bare feet. She stood up, started toward the bedroom door. Then all in an instant something swept over her head, an enfolding blanket; and strong arms were wrapped swiftly about her.

She screamed, fought desperately. But

the blanket drew tight around her, a rope was passed around and around her struggling body, and then she felt herself picked up and carried out into the cold night air. She was placed across a horse, heard a mutter of voices, and then sensed that she was moving through the night, held bound and helpless in the arms of a mounted man.

How long that jolting journey lasted she never knew, but finally a halt was called, and she was lifted down from the horse and carried into a building, through two doors, and laid upon a bed. Feet shuffled; a dim wash of light penetrated the blanket that swathed her head. She felt hands fumbling at the ropes around her; then from across the room a voice spoke harshly:

"We brought along your clothes. Get dressed now, and I'll be back." She heard the door close, a bolt grate shut.

Writhing out of the shrouding blanket, she sat up. She was in a small room, windowless, with a single door. A smoky oil lamp burned on a table and beside it, in a heap, lay her clothes. She stared at the door, hesitated, and then, swiftly, commenced to dress. When she was dressed she crossed the room and tried the door. As she had expected, it was locked. But immediately a voice sounded on the other side.

"You dressed now?" it asked.

Anne said: "Yes. Unlock this door and let me out!"

The door opened and a man came in, closing the door behind him. He was a massive man with beetling brows, huge shoulders and a barrel-like torso. He was Jan Maddock.

"Jan Maddock!" Anne exclaimed. "What do you want? Why have you brought me here?"

"Easy does it." Maddock growled. "I reckon nobody is going to hurt you none." He sank down ponderously in a chair beside the table, stared at her. Suddenly he roared with laughter. "I've sat in this game three years now!" he boomed. "But tonight I've been dealt the trump that wins! I knew it the minute I heard you was going to marry Lew Banner!"

"Lew Banner," Anne said flatly, "will kill you for this."

Maddock shook with laughter. "Not Lew!" he denied. "I've given him plenty of chances to brace me, and he's backed down every time. He's a plumb cautious man, which is just another way of saying yellow. Right now I've sent one of my riders over to rout Lew out. That rider's carrying an agreement by which Lew sells out all his holdings to me for five thousand dollars. He signs the paper and my rider brings it back here, and then I turn you loose."

Anne stared. "Five thousand dollars! Why, Lew's holdings are worth fifty thousand! He wouldn't do that."

"Yes, he will," Maddock returned. "He'll sign up pronto when he learns what will happen to you if he don't. I tell you it's watertight. I've got him thrown and tied. He won't dare do a thing except what I say. He knows if he makes a break, tries to round up help, breathes a word about you, does anything except what I tell him to do, his pretty bride of tomorrow will no longer be a bride—tomorrow."

Anne's blue eyes were blazing, one hand against her tempestuous breast. "He knows you wouldn't dare! Even if he refused you wouldn't dare touch me!"

"Wouldn't I?" Maddock taunted. He stood up chuckling, his eyes sweeping insolently over her. "Why, I dang near hope he *does* refuse!"

He lounged to the door, rumbled over his shoulder: "And don't be bothering your head on how to get away. Because you can't. This door stays locked and two

of my men will be in that next room all the time."

He went out, closing the door and shooting the bolt.

ANNE paced back and forth across the small room. A deep bitterness rose within her, as she thought of the trouble she had brought to Lew Banner. Maddock, of course, was right. Lew, loving her as he did, would never buck Maddock now, would sign away his last head of stock, the ranch of which he was so proud, that he had toiled so many years to build. In this instant she went closer to truly loving Lew Banner than at any other time. And she feared for him. She knew he would do nothing against Maddock until she was released, but afterwards, enraged, bitter, he would certainly go against Maddock, perhaps be killed in the meeting between them that now appeared inevitable.

Long hours dragged past. She tired herself to exhaustion in her restless pacing around that dreary room. Finally she sat on the edge of the bed with her face buried in her hands.

Her head lifted suddenly at the sound of voices in the next room. She heard Maddock's bellowed exclamation, argument, angry words. A moment of silence, then a rush of heavy boots. The bolt grated; the door to her room jerked open. Maddock lunged in, slammed the door, flung his back against it. He stared at her malignantly, his beefy face twitching, dark with anger.

"I wouldn't ever have believed it!" he blazed. "But you was right!"

A sudden nameless fear swept through her. She stared at him, unable to speak, confused as to what could have possibly happened. Maddock spoke again, a curling scorn in his voice.

"Lew Banner," he said, "thinks an uncommon lot of his land. He thinks more of it than he does the woman he aimed to marry."

Anne stared, unbelieving. "Why—"

"Banner refused to sign those deeds!" Maddock shouted. "He started to, but in the end he wouldn't do it! Knowing just what to expect of you, he backed down, refused in the pinch to give up his land. That's the kind of a man you was going to marry."

Something leaped in Anne's breast, shriveled and died. She tried desperately to tell herself that Lew was using his head, had some better plan to help her; but suddenly, in her heart, she couldn't believe it. She stared blankly at the floor. For the moment she had no fear; only this vast sense of bitterness, of broken faith, of her own blind stupidity. Maddock's words brought her head up, her eyes dilating with sudden realization.

"All right," he was telling her. "You know the answer. Not heaven or hell could stop me now! He can't make a fool of me this way. I'll go through with this if I die for it!"

SHE was tense, a slim startled figure, her yellow hair disheveled, her blue eyes constricted. She saw Maddock start forward, walk toward her, deliberate and slow, a juggernaut of advancing flesh. She backed up until her shoulder blades were pressed against the wall. She stared at Maddock, suddenly realized that the man was insane with anger, unreasoning, vindicative, that he saw her only as a pawn, an instrument for elemental vengeance. She said in a low, gasping voice:

"Stay back! You've lost your mind. You don't know what you're doing! You're mad!"

"You'll think I'm mad," Maddock said. He came up to her, reached out and caught her violently by the shoulder. He jerked her away from the wall, swung her savagely around.

Then suddenly, in the next room, a gun crashed flatly. Two other shots roared out in bitter answer. There was a split-second of silence, then one more flat, cracking report. Maddock cursed, swept Anne aside, whirled and faced the door. Cat-quick, he bent forward, blew out the lamp, slid back and put his shoulders against the far wall. A wild hope leaped in Anne Wheaton's heart. Lew had come after her! He *did* have a plan! He had refused to sign away his land only because he feared Maddock would fail to keep the bargain, fail to release her!

She screamed: "Lew! Don't come in! He'll kill you!"

But at that instant the door flew open, and the shadowy figure plunged in. Maddock fired from across the room and was met with an answering flame. For a brief instant those two guns crisscrossed the dark room with driving jets of fire, with thunderous crashes. Maddock fell with a moan, and then, across the room, his aggressor pitched sideways, struck against the wall, slid to the floor.

"Lew! Oh, Lew!" Anne cried. She ran into the next room and seized the lamp. Two men lay on the floor there, one dead, and one writhing a little.

Carrying the lamp she ran back, dropped to her knees, sobbing: "Lew! Can't you speak? Can't—" She stopped suddenly, staring blankly, wildly, at the silent and bloody face of this man who had gone down before Maddock's bullets in a desperate lone-handed play to save her.

For the man was not Lew Banner. It was Steve Fargo!

EARLY that next morning Anne Wheaton walked into the office of Sheriff Dan Lemming. The old sheriff glanced up from his desk, nodded.

"Good morning, Miss Anne."

"Mr. Lemming," Anne started bluntly, "I want the straight story of what happened last night."

The old sheriff looked uncomfortable. "Why, how do you mean, Miss Anne?"

"Maddock sent a man to Lew Banner," Anne said. "He told Lew to sign certain papers or he wouldn't—well, wouldn't release me. And Lew Banner refused to sign those papers, didn't he?"

"Well, yes," the sheriff admitted. "I reckon Lew—well, I reckon he got all mixed up."

"A lot of people have been mixed up lately," Anne said. "Including myself. But it was Steve Fargo that came after me. How did he know where I was?"

The sheriff fidgeted. "Well, soon as Maddock's man left Lew, Lew hit leather for town figuring to round up me and a posse. Steve is staying out the month on that land claim of his that he sold, and Steve's cabin is only a little ways south of Lew's house. Lew stopped in there, figuring to add Steve to the posse. Well, Steve, being kind of reckless like, wanted to start right out for Maddock's and get you. So Lew came on to town while Steve set out alone for you. You already know how Steve got there and how me and the posse Lew rounded up got there a little later."

"A lot too late if it hadn't been for Steve," Anne added cryptically. She turned to the door.

"I sure guess Lew was all mixed up last night, kind of," the sheriff insisted.

"I guess he was," Anne said, and went outside.

Halfway to the doctor's house she met Lew Banner. He paused, staring at her doggedly. "Anne," he insisted, "can't I explain about last night?"

"No," Anne said, "you can't."

"For the first time in my life, I lost my head," Lew said. "I've given years to building up that ranch, and—well, I've always tried to be cautious, to—"

"You're cautious, all right," Anne agreed.

"But it's all over now," Lew insisted. "Nothing's any different than it was before. I mean last night didn't really change anything."

"It changed one thing," Anne said. "Me." And she walked on past him.

She knocked at the door of the doctor's house, and Dr. Livingston opened the door.

"How's Steve Fargo?" Anne asked. "I want to see him."

"Why, he's all right," the doctor smiled. "Just a nasty scalp wound. He left for his cabin an hour ago."

Anne went back and mounted her palomino. An hour later she reined up at Steve Fargo's cabin. She found Steve, his head bandaged, sitting in the kitchen.

"Well, if it isn't the little Cattle Queen!" he grinned, and started to get up. She pressed him back into the chair, sat on the edge of the table, watching him with grave blue eyes.

"Want a bit of advice, Steve?"

He grinned. "Shoot."

"Then never try to figure things out," Anne said. "Just do what your heart tells you to do."

He looked at her steadily. "I'm a saddle bum," he said. "A drifter and a gambler and all-fired reckless, I guess."

"A reckless man," Anne said, "is sometimes a lot safer to have around than a cautious one. If you hadn't been reckless, Steve—except for the very things in you I feared—you could never have helped me in the way you did last night. It's not what a man owns that counts, but what he is. I've learned that now. Any woman in the world would be safe with a man like you."

"I don't want any woman. I want just one woman."

"You don't seem to be trying very hard to get her."

He sprang to his feet then, sweeping her into his arms. After a long moment, he stood back, looking at her flushed and lovely face, her shining eyes.

"I can't change my spots," he warned. "I'll likely gamble always. Just like I gambled and wasted the money I got for my homestead in that mine of Dave Landon's."

"It doesn't matter," Anne promised. "Nothing matters but you, Steve."

"By the way," he added, dark eyes laughing now, "speaking of that mine I sunk my money in, why last week Dave Landon struck a rich vein, and this morning he sold the mine for eighty thousand. Forty thousand of that is our share. . . . "

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THE MOON was bright in her room, shining down past dark, silver-edged clouds. It was shining on her face when she awoke; but that wasn't what had wakened her. It was the sound of men's voices downstairs—a sound that came muffled through the rough planking of the floor and made her heart beat with quickened fear. It froze her there, silent and still and frightened, in the white moonlight.

The sound of men's voices in the night! It had haunted her through those dim years so long ago when her mother was still alive. That rumbling sound of men talking beyond walls had always been the signal that on the next dark night the little family of three would load up the

An Old-West Novelette of Love and Romance

By Art Lawson

(Author of "Gunfighter's Sweetheart," etc.)

old canvas-covered wagon and drag out to start a home again in some more remote section of the West. Always—it seemed to Sally O'Connor—they had been riding on to some other forlorn valley. . . . Always running away. . . .

Until they came to this little depression in the hills on the edge of the Missouri River badlands they had never stayed in one place more than six or seven months. Then there would be that rumble of men's voices in the night driving them on again. But they had been here ten years now, in this place her father had named Peace Valley. And they had found their measure of happiness, of permanance and even security.

But now the old excitement and fear of those nights so many years ago came sweeping back over Sally O'Connor once more. She shoved back the blankets and slipped out of bed. She was a slim, white wraith in her nightgown in the moonlight, with her dark hair falling in waves to her shoulders. For a moment she stood there, holding her breath, her heart pounding. Then, careful to avoid boards that would creak, she crept slowly from her

room and half way down the split-log stairs that led to the big main room of the cabin. She crouched down behind the lodgepole railing and stayed very still and listened.

From the step where she sat, hunched and small and listening, she could hear most of what was being said. She could not see her father. But she could see a dark-skinned man, dressed in black, wearing a battered black sombrero, sitting in one of the rawhide-bottomed chairs gesticulating wildly as he talked. She could just see one of his glistening guns shining in the yellow lamp glow.

"You better make up yore mind," the man was saying. "We need another man on this job. We need yore horses. You goin' to throw in with us an' take a split? Or do we have to tell—?"

Her father's voice broke in: "You don't need to tell anybody anythin', Le Gris. An' you're not tellin' my kid. I'll kill you first!"

"It would be a risky thing to try, Spike, killin' me!" Le Gris said slowly. "There's three of us. An' you ain't got a gun on. You're comin' along with us, or. . . ."

Spike! That wasn't her father's name. But apparently the man had been talking to O'Connor. And O'Connor answered.

"You take the horses. Leave me behind. Take the horses, Le Gris. That's all you need. I wouldn't be any help."

"You wouldn't be any help left behind, either," the dark-faced, gray-mustached man said. "You say you been goin' straight. What's to keep you from turnin' us in or reportin' our plans? You're comin'!"

His hand rested lightly on the arm of the chair above his gun-butt. Sally could see only the side of his face, but she knew that there was an expression of ruthless triumph there.

"You want us to tell yore kid . . . ?"

Her father's voice was dead and flat. "No! You win. I'll go along."

Le Gris jumped to his feet. "I knew you'd come through, Spike!"

Spike, again!

"We better get on the way," Le Gris said.

"I gotta tell my daughter I'm ridin'. I'll make up a story for her."

"Daughter? I thought—" A new interest seemed to have come into Le Gris's voice. "So it's a gal!" He stopped for a moment, musing. "She must be about twenty- twenty-one years old. She look anythin' like—?"

"You shut that off!" Mike O'Connor's voice was heavily threatening. "She's out of this. You mention her name again, Le Gris an' it'll be the last time."

Le Gris's cold laugh broke in. "Kinda touchy, Spike? Well, get it over with. Go up an' tell her. We ain't got much time. But I'm goin' with you. I don't want you to tell her anythin' you shouldn't."

Her father was on his feet now, coming slowly across the room to the doorway. Sudden fright took the girl. She started up the stairs two at a time, running silently. But the flash of her white night gown caught the eye of Anton Le Gris.

"What's that!"

The words snapped out like a pistol shot.

She stumbled over the top step. The sound of feet and ringing spur-chains behind her on the stairs made her flight a frenzy of escape. Her fingers fumbled on the latch of her bedroom door. Then a hard hand clamped on her shoulder; froze her there, swung her around. . . .

SHE was looking straight into the gray eyes of Anton Le Gris, and in the pale moonlight she could see them sparkle with cold laughter. This man seemed all

made of tones of gray—gray eyes, gray hair and mustache, even gray skin. A lobo wolf of that colorless gray that always brings up pictures of death and disaster. But now he was laughing.

"So she was listenin' in," he said. "An' what did you learn?"

She couldn't talk at first. And then her father was there, big, hard, and comforting. "Take yore hand off her shoulder, Le Gris!"

The gunman's hand slipped off slowly. It moved in a short caress over her soft shoulder and an inch or two down her arm. It filled her with loathing.

"She's a pretty little filly," the man said. "And she does look somethin' like—"

"It don't matter what she looks like," Mike O'Connor cut in. "We come up to talk business with her, not to look at her!"

But Le Gris looked. The girl could see those colorless gray eyes moving up and down over the shadowed curves of her white nightgown. Suddenly she felt terribly naked as she stood there trembling, as she read the thoughts that were traveling through the gunman's mind. But she took a grip on herself, and her Irish temper was let loose in a flash of blue eyes and a flirt of dark hair.

"What is it!" she snapped. "What did you come up here to tell me?"

Her father was fumbling for a start when Le Gris broke in. "How long were you there on the stairs?"

"I'd just gotten there," the girl said. "I heard voices. I started down to see what was going on when you looked around. Then I ran!"

"You heard nothing?"

"No!" A sudden inspiration flashed through the girl's mind. Intuitively she knew men, their egos, their strength and their weaknesses. She could see that this man was as wary as a hunting wolf, and she made use of that knowledge in her answer. "You were too quick for me. I didn't get a chance."

It convinced him. He turned to O'Connor with a short, hard laugh. "Just as quick as always, Spike." The girl's eyes flashed up to her father's at that name. She saw the faintest trace of a wince cross his face. But Le Gris did not see the interplay at all. "You've got slow, Spike. But me. . . . "

"Yo're wastin' time," Mike O'Connor cut in. "If we're goin' on that little trip we better get started."

"Where?" the girl broke in.

Her father's big arm slipped around her slender waist. "Don't you worry about that, honey. Anton, here, is an old friend of mine. He's puttin' me in the way of a good deal of cattle. But we gotta get there by mornin' in order to beat another feller to it."

She knew that her father was lying, but she did not show it. "I'll come with you," she said.

Her father shook his head. "We'll have to ride hard," he said. "Too hard for a girl."

"An' don't you worry," Anton Le Gris added. He had glanced over at O'Connor while he was telling the girl where they were going. He was obviously satisfied in the way her father had handled it. "We'll be back soon. Tomorrow night, maybe."

The girl felt his eyes again on her body. She crossed her arms over her breast as if trying to shelter herself from his glance. Then suddenly she kissed her father, and turned and ran into her room. The door slammed hard behind her.

Now she could hear the sound of the two men's spurs rattling down the stairs. Now she could hear the rumble of voices again, then the sound of movement in the long log stable. She pulled her head down under the blankets and cowered there trembling with an unknown fear

that had come up from her childhood. She tried to drown out all the outside world, but through the blankets came the sound of horsehoofs on the hard ground.

Then it was very silent . . . .

IT seemed forever that she lay curled up there in her bed while the moon moved west and left her room in darkness. A thousand times she had the almost irrestible urge to get up and ride on her father's trail. A thousand times she forced it down because she knew that he would not want her along. Sally had sense enough to know that her father was lying when he told her why he was riding. And by the threats she had overheard she realized that he and those others were probably out on some unlawful and dangerous mission. Gradually through that long night she fitted together the picture of her past. Her father, she knew now, had been running away all those times they moved. And up here in Peace Valley his past had caught up with him again.

She trembled there in bed as she listened to the night noises of the small, isolated valley where she and her father lived alone. She had always run the errands to town, not he, for he had always said he was too busy caring for his string of blooded horses and that little herd of blooded cows. She had never thought that there was anything strange in that until tonight. Now she could hear the horses moving about in the stable and in the corral. She could hear the sound of a fox yapping in the hills, of an owl hooting as he swooped down on some small defenceless night animal. The sounds of the world were all around her; and her father, in all the ten years he'd lived in Peace Valley had never once been out.

She sat up suddenly in bed, not knowing that she had slept, but aware immediately of the rosy glow that was suffusing the eastern horizon. The little, gaily-colored bantam rooster who sired his flock of tiny hens was crowing to the dawn. Birds were singing sharply and the smell of rising dew made the new morning fresh and sweet. Then, far off to the north, she heard the first faint vibration of running horses. Strangers, it must be, for her father had said he would not get back until the dark.

She sat there listening, letting the cold dawn air blow on her and wash away the fears and terrors of the night. She climbed out of bed and stood by the window. The first horseman came over the rise several hundred yards below the house. She could not recognize the rider, but the horse—she would have sworn it was one of the Broken Arrow Morgans, one of her father's horses.

Almost immediately came another rider, and a third. And her breath caught, and her hand moved to her throat. As the horsemen swept in she recognized Anton Le Gris. But her father was not with them . . . .

She stopped only long enough to throw over her shoulders a wrapper she had made of an old blanket. But when she got downstairs to the yard, the three men were already tightening up the cinches of their saddles on three fresh horses, the three they had apparently ridden in the night before. As she ran out to the stable Anton Le Gris saw her.

"Where's Mike?" she asked. "Why didn't he come back?"

She was only a few feet from Le Gris, now. He was smiling that gray smile. "He's comin'," he said, "with the cattle. He'll be along sometime today."

The two-gun man slipped up into his saddle. His gray lips were set in that enigmatic smile. Somehow it infuriated the girl. She knew, and she could not hide it from him, that she distrusted him and loathed him.

"Something's happened to him!" she cried. "You've—"

"He'll be along, sister," the gunman said. "An' you tell him for me that we'll be back one of these days. You tell him we like his kid. You tell him that."

The way he looked at her sent a chill through her, made her bristle. Then he was swinging his horse around, calling for the other two men. One of them was short and squat; the other lean and swarthy. Both were hard-looking; both carried two guns slung low and carbines in saddle boots.

Le Gris sunk in his spurs, plunged ahead with the other two following close. Le Gris looked back as they vanished into the wood at the far end of the clearing and waved to her again. And she stood there with the wind blowing her wrap back against her, staring after them, feeling the cold chill of dark premonition; of dread.

Each of the men carried saddle bags, obviously heavily loaded. She knew now where her father had ridden that night. And why . . . .

The soft sound of a walking horse behind her brought her out of her daze. She swung around, lithe as some woods creature, suddenly on guard. A cry of dismay came through her taut lips.

There was her father, white-haired Mike O'Connor sitting the saddle on one of his blooded Morgans. He was slumped forward over the horn. And as Sally watched with her blue eyes wide in fear she saw the drops of blood running down from his fingers, dropping dully to the green grass . . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Killer!

IT seemed hours before Mike O'Connor opened his eyes and spoke. He smiled, though, when he came to, and looked up into the clear eyes of his daughter. She was sitting there on the edge of his bed watching over him. She had brought him in and bound his wounds, and had been waiting for him to die. One bullet had broken his arm. A second had gone through his chest . . . .

"I shouldn't of done it, honey," he said. "I should of shot them three right here. They been—"

"Keep quiet, Pop," the girl said. She put a cool hand on his forehead, pushed back the white hair that was straggling into his eyes. "You're hurt, Pop. Take it easy. There'll be plenty of time to talk later."

He shook his head weakly. "There won't be much time! That's it, honey. Stay with me. Yore hand feels so cool on my head." He stopped for a moment, then went on: "I was a coward. When I was a kid I rode the long trails, Honey. I met yore ma in a honkatonk. Le Gris knew all that. He an' I did a couple of jobs then, more than twenty years ago. But yore ma made me reform. She was a good girl, honey. She an' me hit the straight road after I met her in that honkatonk."

The girl smiled. There were tears in her blue eyes. She could not talk.

"Le Gris found out where I was," her father continued. "He was goin' to tell you all that, Sally, gal. I didn't want you to know. That's why I went out on that job last night. We blew open the express car of the Transcontinental. You'll have to hump it, kid. They recognized me an' our horses. They'll take it out on you."

The girl was crying now. "You should of told me all that, Pop. I'll always love you an' ma. You should of told me why we was always pullin' up stakes. You should of told Le Gris to go to hell. But take it easy now, Pop."

His answering smile was very weak. "I almost shot Le Gris," he said "after he

killed the engineer of that train. He didn't need to do that. But my arm ain't what it was. An' I was already clipped.

"Now you forget it, honey. You forget everything. You get the hell out of this country an' don't come back. Ol' man Smith, in town, will give you a good price for the horses an' cows. Take it an' go to some other state. Beat it before the posse catches up."

She clung to his hand and would not leave. He closed his eyes and talked with his soft, far-away voice, begging her to ride out. And as the day wore on towards noon she listened and watched. And then she fell to her knees beside the bed, sobbing as if her heart would break. She could feel the stiffness creep into the hand she held, the coldness of the brow . . . .

She was all alone now. Her father's past had caught up with him . . . .

A soft voice at her shoulder caused her to turn, look up, her eyes wet, her face tear-stained. Her father had been dead for a long time, now, it seemed. The hand she held was rigid, cold. And the man she saw there standing in the room behind her also seemed cold, cold and stiff, but alive. There was no sympathy in his eyes.

"Where are the rest?" he asked.

She didn't answer right away. She just knelt there by the bed and looked at him. He was young, not more than twenty-six or seven. His yellow hair showed under the brim of his battered Stetson. His eyes were blue like hers, and his face was lean, tanned, strong. One of his thin, powerful hands was on the butt of a single gun he wore in a holster at his thigh.

"Who are you?" she asked, with no emotion at all in her dead voice.

"That buzzard there," the man jerked a thumb towards Mike O'Connor, "was one of the four who held up the Transcontinental Express last night. Where are the other three?"

The girl came to her feet, stood up in front of her father as if to protect him from the hatred of this young stranger. "I didn't ask you who 'that buzzard' is," she said with scorn in her voice. "I know who he is. He's my father. He's dead. I asked you who *you* were. And what business have you here?"

The man's blue eyes softened ever so slightly at the girl's answer. But that hint of sympathy was gone at once.

"I'm the brother of the engineer who was killed last night," he said. "I was takin' a joy-ride in his cab when they held us up. I got in only two shots after they plugged Bill. But I got three more for the other three skunks. Where are they?"

The girl's knees were shaking so violently she had to sit on the edge of the bed. Her wide eyes were full of shock and horror. Here she had thought a man had come who would possibly champion her cause. But now . . . .

"There ain't no need of stallin'," the stranger said. "I found the four horses in the barn. The others are around somewhere. I want them."

Sally was on her feet again. She edged past the tall stranger and stepped towards the fireplace. Involuntarily she glanced over at the mantle where a loaded shotgun rested across the eight-point antlers. The man saw what she was after, stepped into the way.

"So you killed my dad," she said in a cold, dead voice.

"He had it comin' to him."

Then the girl screamed, went clawing after the stranger. He tried to hold her off, but the agony of her heartbreak gave her a strength beyond her smallness. She could not reason it out and realize that her father had been holding up that train nor that this stranger's brother, Bill, had been killed. This man had shot her father. She would shoot him . . . .

But he was too strong for her. Finally she fell, a slumped pitiful figure, to the

floor, too weak with grief and too worn even to look up at him. Dimly she realized that he was standing in front of her, straddle-legged, looking down.

"I'm sorry it was your father," he said softly. "But they shot Bill first. Bill wasn't even armed." There was a long silence then before the man went on. "You goin' to tell me where the other three went?"

The girl got to her feet again and stood before him, her small fists curled tight. And in that thin white nightgown which she still wore she looked something like an angel might have looked—an angel standing guard, perhaps on the road to vengeance.

"Maybe you can find them," she said coldly. "I don't know where they went." Then her voice rose, harsh, hateful. "Now get out! You've tallied yore first. Get out an' leave me with him."

The man started to back away. The girl crept slowly up on him. He backed away more rapidly. Then turned at the doorway and ran for his horse. This was something that he had never expected. This was harder to face than the blaze of a thousand guns, this cold bitter voice from the soft mouth of the lovely, dark-haired girl.

He swung into the saddle and rode away.

And she collapsed there in the doorway, too weary even to retain her consciousness.

SHE buried her father the next morning up on the hill beside her mother. She patted the earth down over his grave and planted on it some wild flowers she found in the woods. In front of the big piece of granite she rolled to the head of the grave she worked out a design in fist-sized pieces of quartz. "Pop," it spelled. It would have to do until she could get a stone-cutter to carve something in that big boulder.

Then wearily she went back to the house. She had spent her last night in this place where she and her father and mother had found peace. Yesterday a posse had come and gone, baffled, sure that Mike O'Connor had led a gang to rob that train. The sheriff had even produced a faded old poster with a picture on it that might have been Mike in his younger days. But Spike Connors was the name then. He had been wanted for many robberies down along the Mexican border. He had not been seen for twenty years or more.

The sheriff had tried to find out from Sally where Spike Connors' gang had gone. She said that she didn't know. For now a grim determination had come into her heart. She was going to ride on the trail of that blond stranger. She wasn't going to kill him, but she was going to kill the three who had brought her father to his death. And she wanted no interference from a sheriff's posse.

She looked around the house where she had lived these past ten years. She went up to her little room with its peaked ceiling and bright blanket and curtains, with its round rug that she had made herself. And in the closet were her dresses, bright little things that she would need no longer. She was going to do a man's job. She was wearing man's clothing. She wore levis and boots, and Mexican spurs that shone brightly in the sun, and her father's Colt strapped around her waist. She didn't wear chaps for she did not expect to go into the brush country. Somewhere, sometime, she would find Anto Le Gris. When that day came she would kill him!

She rode away a small, slim figure. She did not look back. She rode to town and looked up old man Smith but he wouldn't buy the ranch.

"I'll take it off yore hands," he said. "I'll lease it from you until you want it back. I'll run it. The profits are mine. And I'll pay you well for the lease."

Before she left she asked old man Smith one question: "What was the name of that engineer who was killed the other night?"

"Bill McMahon," Smith told her. "He has a brother called Bart."

"I know he has a brother," the girl said.

Smith didn't ask her how she knew, or why she had asked him the first question. He just shook hands with her as if she were actually the man her clothes would have made her.

"Come back soon, Sally. This is your home range," he said.

She vaulted into the saddle before the tears began again. If you're a man doing men's work, you have no business acting like a woman. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

A Man's Job

SALLY O'CONNOR could trail a deer through the scrub thickets or a mountain lion through the hills. But never before had she tried to track down human beings, and the trail was already two days old when she started out. However, she knew that the men had headed south. She figured it out that they would head up the Powder River, leave Montana, and cut into Wyoming. So she rode south, with the Big Horn mountains blue on the horizon to her right, her mind full of puzzles that she could not yet solve.

Would she find those three who had blackmailed her father into death? Would she kill them if she did run up against them? Would she find that cowboy with the yellow hair on their trail? Would he beat her to it?

More and more as she rode south, as she camped alone in the hills and looked into the glowing coals of her small fire, she thought of that blue-eyed man who had called her dead father a buzzard. And as she rode farther and farther from home that burning hatred for him grew less intense. She tried to tell herself that nobody could be excused for killing Mike O'Connor. But, at the same time, she made up excuses for that cowboy whose name was Bart McMahon, whose brother had been killed on the train hold-up.

She would see him there in the coals of the fire. She would waken in the night dreaming of him, and a flush would creep into her cheeks, and she would try to curse at herself as she'd heard men do in town, because she felt like a bit of a traitor to her father.

She left Powder River where Salt Creek comes in from the south and rode on towards the Laramie Mountains. She met a man there, an outlaw by the look of him, who gave her a few clues. He wondered why a girl so young and pretty should be riding alone with a string of two full-blood Morgan horses. She wouldn't tell him. But she did say that she was Spike Connor's daughter and that she was looking up an old friend of his, a man by the name of Le Gris.

The stranger looked frightened when she said that. She knew that he would have some information. She used all her womanly wiles on him and finally offered him one of the horses if he would tell her where she could find Le Gris. Reluctantly he said then that he'd heard of Connors years ago down along the Border. And he thought—he wasn't sure—that this man Le Gris was now running a honka-tonk in Colorado. So she gave him the horse, anyway, and rode on down the eastern side of the Laramies.

She found Le Gris all right down on the South Platte river. He had a saloon and gambling dive there by a ferry crossing. She found it because the name was the Lobo Saloon, and she knew by now that Le Gris liked to think of himself as

a wolf who led his pack or ran alone. . . .

Her gun was loose in her holster when she found Le Gris. Her hand was on the butt. She had pictured to herself, time and again, this scene at the end of the trail when she would curse him out and shoot him. But when she stepped into the smoke-filled saloon on the banks of the Platte there he was, standing right by the door as if waiting for her. That thin, wolfish smile was on his lips. He did not seem surprised to see her.

"So it's Connors' daughter?" he said. "We been expectin' you."

"Expecting me?" The surprise of it put her off. Her hand clenched on the butt of her father's gun yet it would not pull the weapon. She had walked straight into a trap.

"Yes," he said. "We heard you were riding this way. We're all glad to see you."

She could not even speak then. That man she had given the horse to had betrayed her. And now that she was face to face with Le Gris she knew that she could not kill him in cold blood. Dimly she was aware that Le Gris was talking.

"I'm sorry to hear that Spike died. He was an old friend of mine. I'll do all I can to take care of his daughter. Are you staying long? We have a room all fitted out for you here. There is no hotel at Wolf Crossing. . . ."

Over at the bar she could see the stranger she had met up on Salt Creek. Beside him was one of the two that had been in Le Gris's gang the night her father was killed. Their backs were towards her but they were watching her in the mirror.

"Yes," she said finally. "I'll stay. It's good of you. . . ."

Le Gris took her by the arm and led her around back of the bar and into a dusky hallway. There was a flight of stairs going up towards the front of the two-story building. Le Gris followed behind her.

THE room he took her to both frightened and fascinated her. It had been lived in before by a woman, she could tell. But it apparently hadn't been lived in for a long time. There were unmistakable signs of that around. The room was decidedly musty. Yet there was a Navajo blanket on the bed like the old worn one she had left at home. There were curtains on the windows. A silver comb, and a silver-backed brush were on the dressing table at one side of the room. And there was a great, full-length mirror there shot through with fine rainbows as if it was very old.

His voice caused her to jump, to glance around fearfully. "It's your room," he said, "as long as you stay. I had it swept out for you today."

At the look in his gray eyes she blanched. She had muffed this whole job. She had let herself get into his hands. And now she felt a tremor running through her spine at the way he looked into her eyes and glanced down over her body that was slim and straight in the man's clothing.

"There are dresses and things in the closet," he said. Then he laughed at her obvious terror. "You don't need to worry. There are other women on this floor. Half a dozen of them. I'll introduce them. . . ."

He left the door open and came back a moment later with four or five dance hall girls. They were young, most of them, but looked old to Sally. They were all in robes or nightgowns, none of them dressed. The rouge was thick on their cheeks and lips. Sally had never known any woman except her mother, and though these were kind to her and obviously envious of her youthful beauty, they frightened her even more than Le Gris had.

"I'm tired," she said. "Could I be left alone, to rest?"

The girls went back to their rooms. Le Gris hesitated on the threshold. "If there's anything. . . ."

"There's nothing I want," Sally said. "Who are these girls?" A plan was evolving in her mind, a foggy plan at this stage, but one she thought might work out.

"They work here," Le Gris explained. "They dance, downstairs."

"Can you give me a job, Le Gris?"

The man apparently misread what he saw in her eyes. He stepped in over the threshold. One of his arms was held up in front of him as if ready to go around Sally's waist. She backed away from him.

"You won't have to work," he said. "You are the daughter of my friend. You don't want to become a dance-hall girl. You are too lovely for that . . . Sally."

The gun was still in her holster. Her hand crept down to the butt.

"Will you give me a job?" she asked again. "I want to work for my living. I don't want it given to me."

Her voice was tense, drawn. The man's hand barely touched her side and she dodged back out of the way. His arm dropped. That thin smile came back to his face.

"Okay," he said. "But you won't want to keep it long."

Then the door clicked behind him, and he was gone down the stairs. Her old man's heavy gun was clenched in her hand. But it was too late. Mike O'Connor had never taught his daughter to be a killer. . . .

SHE locked the door and sat on the edge of the bed. Carefully, deliberately, she started to clean the old gun. She wanted it in perfect working order when the time came to use it—and she promised herself that the time would come very soon. She had been taken unawares, that was all. She would be ready next time. She would tell Le Gris that he had been the cause of her father's death. She would threaten to turn him over to the law. Then he would probably do something or other that would give her the excuse to shoot. That was her plan.

When the gun was cleaned she slipped it under the pillow on the wide bed that was to be hers. It was still daylight and she could see from her window the slow coil of the river and the hot, dusty roadway that ran down in front of the honkatonk. There were a few squat, false-fronted stores on the opposite side of the street; and down a ways was the cable of the ferry that she had crossed in coming into town. She figured that she knew the lay of the land pretty well if she had to run in a hurry.

Then she started looking over the room. There were two doors. One was the door leading into the hallway. The other she opened. And when she opened it she gasped—her breath caught, and for a moment she completely forgot the grim purpose that had brought her all the way to Colorado from Montana. There, behind this door, was a closet—and it was filled with an array of clothing such as she had never seen before. They were dresses in silks, mostly, in reds and yellows and blue and black. There were brightly colored dresses that looked as if they had faded over the years. They were not at all like anything she had seen before—not at all like her little home-made ginghams.

Cautiously she touched one of them, felt the silk like smooth fire under her finger. As if she was afraid to hurt it, she took a blue one from the hanger and held it to the light. It was lovely as a dream to her. And then she was climbing out of her levis and cotton shirt, overwhelmed by an irrestible desire to try on that too beautiful dress that she had found in the honkatonk closet.

The levis had slipped to the floor, and

the shirt over her head, when there was a movement on the far side of the room. She jumped with uncontrollable fear. Then she laughed, for she was looking into the mirror, the cracked full-length mirror with all its rainbows. That had been the movement; her own body white and naked, reflected in the mirror. She had never seen herself before in such a full-length mirror and she looked wide-eyed in the glass, full of wonder. It made her flush. It reminded her of the way Le Gris had looked at her a couple of weeks back when he caught her at the head of the stairs. She had never thought of herself before as a woman to be desired.

Quickly she slipped that blue dress over her shoulders, pulled it down over her hips. Then she found a pair of silver slippers in the closet and put them on over her bare feet. She hooked up the dress, and wondering what she would look like, tiptoed over to the mirror. She gasped again, for the girl she saw there mixed in with the spider-webbed rainbows did not seem to be herself, but someone infinitely more lovely.

The dress gave deeper tints to her blue eyes. Her shoulders were bare, and her throat was white against the deep blue silk. The material clung tightly over her breasts and down to her waist. Then it flared out, full, and alive with her slightest movements. It reminded her of a tintype of her mother who had dressed like this when she was young. And Sally knew that her mother had been lovely, also.

While she stood there an alien thought crept unbidden into her mind. Would that stranger with the blue eyes and the yellow hair find her lovely, too? She flushed deeply; she felt as if the red covered her entire body. That stranger had killed her father! She had no business thinking of him at all. And yet. . . .

There was a knock on the door. Le Gris was outside.

"It's time to eat," he said. "Are you ready?"

For a moment she was violently agitated. She couldn't have that man catch her in this dress. She couldn't!

But he knocked again. She tossed her hair back and straightened her shoulders. The hell with him! She'd give him one good look before she finished her job on him. She turned the key in the door, stepped back to let him in. She just stood there. He was wordless—and that thin, wolfish smile was a long time in coming.

"A girl like you," he said slowly, "could have anything."

"Anything?" she answered. She was calm now. Somehow the sheer beauty of this dress gave her poise. She would never again be frightened by any man. Somehow she knew now that her loveliness gave her a weapon over men, a dangerous weapon, maybe, but a powerful one. "Anything," she repeated, "but what I want. Nothing will bring my father back."

She thought for a moment that he was going to reach for her again. He had that look in his gray eyes. But his expression became cold.

"If you're going to eat," he said, "I'll take you down to the Chinaman's."

She followed him down the stairs. She could see by the way he walked that some great emotion was tearing at him. She secretly hoped that he would fall in love with her. Then her revenge, when the time came, would be all the better.

He led her out his own private entrance and down the street to the Chinaman's. On the way she was acutely aware of men staring after her. It made her walk only the straighter, only the more defiantly.

Then they were at the Chinaman's, sitting in a booth with a low wall. She looked up at her escort who had said not a word since they left her room. He was staring straight at her.

Her eyes wavered, caught for a moment

at a movement beyond Le Gris. There they froze, then swung back. And she felt that the honkatonk owner must surely see her heart beating because it was pounding so hard.

She had looked straight into the blue eyes of the yellow-haired stranger. Amazement and a faint tinge of disgust, were written on his face. He had recognized her, even in this get-up. He had seen her, Sally O'Connor, sitting with the man who, her father had told her, had killed his brother. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Honkatonk Queen

ALL through the meal she was aware of that man's cold blue eyes on her. She couldn't seem to eat, but she did manage to talk, with feverish animation, in a wild effort to cover her feelings. And all through the meal she could feel Le Gris tightening up, staring at her in a strange way as if trying to fathom what was behind the chatter, what was actually behind her coming here. So, when they were through, she turned down Le Gris's offer to take her riding in his spring-wagon, and ran up to her room and bolted the door. She sat there for a long time in the waning light, looking at herself in the ancient mirror.

She wondered what had come over her. And as her mind groped through the mazes she was shocked at what she found there. She had read about something called love in the books her father had at their house. She had wondered about it, thought about it, dreamed about it. Was this what was happening to her? Had she fallen in love with the man who confessed killing her father . . . ?

The thought terrified her more than anything else had in her life. And, as she sat there in front of the mirror she resolved to get this whole affair over with as soon as possible. To turn Le Gris and his mob over to the authorities, whoever they were in this region, and then to get away as far as possible and as quickly as she could.

She slipped out of the silver slippers and the rustling silk dress and back into her levis and shirt and boots. Then carefully she unbolted the door and opened it a crack. From downstairs she could hear the sound of piano playing and the sounds of celebrating men and laughing women. And in the darkness at the bottom of the steps a cigarette coal glowed.

"Can I help you, Miss Connors?" a man's voice asked.

She didn't recognize the voice. The man started up the stairs. "No!" she said. Then quickly she covered up: "Yes, please. I'd like a drink of water."

The man went back to the bottom of the stairs and called through the doorway. A moment later a bartender came with a pitcher of water and a glass. When the bartender left the man remained behind, his cigarette glowing redly.

She waited then until long after Le Gris came up to say good-night to her. He talked only in monosyllables, and the look of the hunter in his eyes was changed, ever so slightly, to the look of the hunted.

"If you need anything," he said, "one of my men will fetch it for you." Then he added: "There is always one or two of them around!"

She wondered what he meant. She waited until the place was silent, until the first streaks of dawn were in the sky. Then softly she crept to the floor. Downstairs another voice asked: "Can I do anything for you, Miss Connors?" And that time she didn't answer, but bolted the door swiftly behind her and crept shivering into bed.

She was a prisoner here in the second floor of the honkatonk! There was no way to get out.

And yet there must be. Her father had often said that no man ever born was smart enough to keep any woman from getting what she wanted. She must figure a way. Maybe—maybe—The scheme struck her in a flash. There was a way!

THAT night she put on the blue dress again and looked at herself in the mirror. Then she changed it for another one she had found in the closet, a dress of another shade of blue, that also left her shoulders bare and was cut square and low in the neck. She felt a bit of a hussy in this dress, but she figured that it would help her carry out her scheme. She went to the door and called to the guard when she was all dressed, and told him that she wanted to see Anton Le Gris. She stood there and waited until Le Gris came in.

"So you found another one," he smiled. "Those clothes fit you as if they were made for you." He was staring fixedly at her face, as if he was forcing himself to look at her. And then she smiled at him.

"Did the original owner look as lovely as I?" she asked.

His lips tightened. He did not answer that question. He spoke almost abruptly. "What did you want of me?"

"To take me to supper, as you did last night. I haven't been out today. I thought you'd like to take me out before—before I start to work."

"To work?"

"Sure," she laughed. "I'm going to work in your honkatonk. Didn't we agree on that?"

"We did," he started. "But—" He broke off suddenly, staring at her in that peculiar way. Then he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He walked stiffly up to her and took her by the arm. She did not flinch this time or try to dodge. "I suppose you know that you're a prisoner here," he said.

"Of course!" she smiled. "But where would I go if I did break away?"

Le Gris could not take his eyes from her. Somehow she felt infinitely older tonight in this daring dress than she had even last night. The events of the past weeks had given her courage. These dresses seemed to give her the bravado that should go with them. She felt that she could best Le Gris. And yet her heart quivered within her and her knees went weak.

"I don't know," he answered. "There's something I want to find out, though. What did your father tell you before he died?"

"He said that you were an old friend of his."

"Did he tell you how he happened to be shot." The words came quickly.

And she answered just as fast. "He didn't. But I know!"

"How do you know?" Le Gris asked.

"There was a feller riding with the engineer," she said. "He told me. He said that he did it."

That tenseness in Le Gris laxed then. The thin, wolfish smile came back.

"He's a yeller-haired feller—a gent with blue eyes. Tall, lean."

The girl felt the color rising to her cheeks. "No!" she said. "Not the one I saw. He told me and I tried to shoot him. But he knocked the gun out of my hand. He was short, sort of. Had black hair. And I don't know what kind of eyes."

"I wondered," Le Gris said.

The girl could not understand him at all. And then a suspicion started to crawl into her mind. Had he seen Bart McMahon at the restaurant the other night? Had one of his spies reported that she had recognized the man? Or . . . ?

"What did you wonder?" she asked.

"Just that!" he said. "I suppose your

father told you we were holding up a train."

"No!" she shook her head and lied to him again. "He said you were out after some cattle and were held up by road agents. It was the short, dark man who told me that Pop was shot in a train hold-up. But I didn't believe him. I knew that the old man wouldn't do that." Then she stopped for a moment, glanced down at the tips of her slippers. "But I guess he was telling the truth."

Le Gris' arm was around her bare shoulders now. She felt her skin gooseflesh, but she was determined to play the game. It was only when his fingers began to move down her arm that she wriggled loose. She forced a laugh.

"Are you going to take me to eat?" she asked. "That's what you came for!"

"Of course." He smiled wolfishly.

"And do I start work tonight? I don't want people to think I can't make my own way."

The thin line of his teeth showed between his curling lips. It sent the tremors running through her body; brought back the fear in her heart. That smile told her much more than his words.

"You know, of course, that you'll have to dance with any bum that comes in? You know the game. Wouldn't you rather. . . . "

"I'd rather work downstairs," she said.

HER heart was cold within her when she swept into the great room of the honkatonk that night. She felt the men's eyes staring at her. She felt the pity and envy in the eyes of the other dance-hall girls who were faded and old before their time. She knew that the color was rising to her throat and cheeks again, and that it became only the brighter when she tried to force it down.

Then, down at the end of the bar she saw Bart McMahon standing with one foot on the rail, with his lean hand around a glass of beer. She pretended not to notice him and flounced across to the other end of the room where Anton Le Gris was starting a game of stud. She smiled down at him, at the other three men who were playing. And already her smile was mechanical as the smiles of the other girls.

"Maybe you'll teach me how to play that, Anton," she said. "I must learn sometime."

He shook his head. "No woman should gamble," he said. "Women are not gamblers. It's not their line."

He looked around at the other men as if he had said something very wise. They nodded. But the girl's blue eyes narrowed ever so slightly. It seemed that Le Gris was reading her mind again—that he was warning her that he knew her game. After all, it was a big gamble she was making—gambling her reputation and her life for vengeance. And vengeance is a paltry thing after all.

"I'll just watch," she said.

Across the room her eyes caught the blue ones of Bart McMahon. She saw scorn there, deeper than she had seen before. She saw the curling of his lips. She had to force her eyes away from his and she looked around the room. Daphne, the girl with the falsely blonde hair, was sitting on a cowboy's lap laughing. Dolores, the fat little Mexican girl, was entertaining a dusky giant at the bar. All the girls were very busy. And Sally, on her first night, had no partner at all. She looked back at the game. Then almost involuntarily her eyes wandered back to Bart McMahon—but he was looking in the mirror.

And then she saw something that caused her breath to come short for a moment. One of the two men who had been with Le Gris on that fateful trip north—the swarthy man whom, she had learned, was called Slug Moran—was

standing just around the bar to McMahon's right. The other, the heavy-set gun-toter, Bat Evrie, was on McMahon's left. Slug could see past McMahon to Le Gris who was playing poker. Evrie could see his partner in the mirror and could also see McMahon from where he stood. But that wasn't the only thing that caused her fear. Another man came up to talk to Evrie and Evrie moved slightly so that the newcomer would not be between him and McMahon. And when Slug Moran saw the girl looking at him he glanced away. But when one of the girls flossied up as if to talk to McMahon, Slug Moran caught her eye and she swerved suddenly and headed for another customer.

Then she heard Anton Le Gris talking as he swiftly dealt out the cards. "I hear that the brother of that engineer that was killed up in Montana is in town hunting for the hold-up men. I'm glad I never robbed a train. I hear he's hell on wheels."

One of the other men at the table grinned at that. He commented: "He'd need to be hell on wheels."

And another man said: "What kind of a feller is he, Anton? What's he look like?"

"Short, I hear," Le Gris said. "A short, dark hombre."

The beating of blood in Sally's ears muffled the rest of Le Gris's comment, and then the four men at the table were busily playing and she walked away from the table. She had intended asking Bart McMahon for a dance tonight and then tell him who had been the three others at the hold-up. But now she knew she could not do it. She knew that he had been spotted, that he was being watched. And suddenly she didn't want vengeance any more. She only wanted to tell him to get away from there. She had tried to shoot him once—now she wanted to keep him from being shot. It was too much for her to figure out.

She tried picking up a miner to carry out the dance-hall bluff. But he didn't seem to be interested. She wondered if her technique was wrong. She talked to a man at the bar and he bought her a beer and then moved off. She drank the beer and didn't like it. And all this time she was looking at Le Gris in the mirror, and he never once looked up at her.

She did not know that she was running head-on into a trap.

And finally when she could stand it no longer she sidled up to young McMahon with a stiff, mechanical smile on her face that she'd seen Daphne use.

"Kinda lonely?" she asked.

From the corner of her eye she saw Slug Moran edge closer. She could hear the music playing in the dance-hall that was just another big room under the same roof as the saloon. She could sense a tightening of the whole atmosphere.

"I wouldn't say so," McMahon said. He was looking straight at her. "I wouldn't say that I was lonely—for your kind!"

His words stung like a slap in the face. Then Moran was right between them, growling: "Stranger. . . . You ain't allowed to talk like that to ladies in this place!"

It was crude, terribly crude—but effective! Moran's hand was on his gun. The stranger, Bart McMahon was reaching for the shining butt of his Colt. It was all so fast, all so horribly framed that the girl could not even scream. In a flash she saw the whole picture.

They had planted this, they had been waiting. They knew that she had recognized McMahon in the restaurant the other day. They probably thought that the two had come down from Montana to get the goods on the gang.

And now Moran's gun was up a fraction ahead of McMahon's. Slug was a trained gunman. Bart was only a cowboy. And when he was gone. . . .

The girl screamed then. "It's a trap!" she shouted. "These people. . . . "

Something hit her from behind. It was Bat Evrie, whom she had forgotten. But there was still a chance. She kicked viciously at Slug Moran with her silver slippers. She screamed again as the guns began to blast. And then Bat Evrie had her pulled away, back into the crowd, and all she could see were the milling people, and the gun smoke lazily rising. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Price of a Life

SHE couldn't seem to stop sobbing up there in her room where Bat Evrie had dragged her as she screamed and kicked. He had flung her on the bed and left her there and then gone out and stood by the open door. The silence of the place was strange to her, and the sound of her sobbing seemed to come from some other person. . . .

She had tried to help that man, tried to get her little vengeance, and he had been killed, she was sure. She didn't see him fall, but she knew that Slug Moran's draw was miraculous . . . And that the place was loaded to the guards with Le Gris men. She had betrayed McMahon into the killers' hands. She had tried to kill him once and had repented. He had looked on her with scorn. Yet his blood was on her hands . . . And she couldn't stop sobbing.

Then the door opened and her sobs cut off short. Her hand reached under the pillow for the gun, felt the comfort of its cool deadliness. Her eyes were wide with terror and dismay. But the time had come.

Le Gris was standing in the doorway, smiling thinly. "So the brother of the dead engineer was short—and dark, eh?" he said, his voice silky.

She did not answer. Le Gris stepped through the doorway, closed and locked the door behind him. He took the key out of the lock and slipped it into his pocket.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that it had to be this way. But you see, we couldn't let McMahon go free with the notions he had in his head. We sort of figured that there was some tie-up between you and him. Just your coming told us that. Spike Connors hated my guts. He'd never of told his daughter that Anton Le Gris was his friend. . . . "

He was standing now almost directly in front of the girl, towering over her, a gray, ruthless wolf. And in his eyes was that old look of the wolf on the hunt, of the wolf who is about to spring on its prey. But the girl's small hand under the pillow still clutched the revolver. And now was the time to use it.

"Maybe you've learned," he said, "that you can't fight Le Gris. Your father never learned, or your mother. But maybe the daughter has learned."

"I've learned," she said, "that you are a skunk in wolf's clothing. Even if McMahon did kill my father, you were responsible for it. You blackmailed him into that robbery—into his death. . . . "

Her voice broke. The gun came from under the pillow. Le Gris laughed. And even when she had it pointed towards his stomach, when her finger curled over the trigger he laughed.

"And now you are going to pay," the girl whispered.

The hammer snapped down. There was no explosion. The girl sat there holding the gun dully in her hand, looking at it now instead of Le Gris while he laughed on.

"You see, I had the powder taken out of the shells. I sort of felt it would not be safe for you to have a gun."

She came up to her feet then, slowly, like a cat going into a crouch. Something had happened to her fear. And now there

was in her heart only a cold hatred for this man who could kill and smile, who could take a helpless girl and laugh. She had gotten beyond words. She had gotten beyond even civilized conduct. She wanted to kill and run!

But her only weapon had been taken from her.

"You are beautiful," he said softly, "even when you're angry. Why don't you forget this McMahon? After all, he killed your old man. I didn't. Why don't you forget him? They're all dead now. There's only you . . . And me . . . "

"It will never be you—and me!" the girl said. She had to admit to herself even in the turmoil, of the moment that there was something fascinating in this man who could be so cold, so direct, so absolutely self-contained. But there was something unholy in him. Proposing to her here while death lay silent downstairs. Making suggestions like that to her—the daughter of a man who had hated and feared him through a life-time. "Let me out," she said tensely. "Let me out of here. You can't keep me any longer."

He stepped over as she started for the door. He stepped back again when she dodged. And then his hands were on her shoulders again. His face was close to hers.

"You'll have everything," he said, "here—"

Something broke within her at that. She could stand it no longer. She leaped for him, clawing. He stepped back out of the way, swung her off. But she came back again—and he laughed. And then she was helpless with one of his arms around her back holding her tight against him, with his right hand keeping her left arm by her side so that she could no longer fight. She was panting hard, breathless.

"If I let go, will you behave?" he asked. "I don't like to do it this way."

"If you let me go," she said, "I'll kill you the moment I get a chance."

His left arm laxed ever so slightly and she twisted free. Like lightning she got away and though he clawed after her, he only caught the thin material of the back of that blue silk dress that was so many years old. It tore in his hands, stopped him momentarily. Then she was crouched over by the dresser. She flung the silver comb, first. It was heavy. But he got out of its way.

He was closer now. She flung the silver-backed brush. She couldn't help it, but she screamed when she flung that brush, and she screamed again when it clipped him on the forehead and the red blood dripped down. Yet still he came on. And the look of the wolf was the only thing that was in his gray face, now.

"One way or the other," he said, "I'll have you. I can't let you go, too."

She wriggled aside as he sprung for her. She crouched by the bed, now, holding the useless gun in her hand. The blue dress had slipped down, hampering her movements. She tried to hold it up in her left hand as she held the gun in her right. He was coming for her and she flung the gun. It missed him, crashed into the mirror in which she had first seen herself and broke it into a thousand pieces. And then he had her again, and she was too weary now to even resist.

His hand clamped down on her mouth cutting off her screams. And in the death-watch silence she could hear the music playing very loudly downstairs; she could hear the girls laughing and the deep tones of the men.

Suddenly she bit Le Gris' hand.

He cursed. His hand moved back, bleeding. There was a faint sound of movement outside the door in the hall, just as she screamed again. . . .

LE GRIS leaped wolf-like to his feet as the door crashed in. And, at what

she saw standing there, Sally was too paralysed to move at all from the bed. Bart McMahon was there like a spectre risen from the grave. There was blood on his face. And the sleeve of his blue shirt was dark with more blood.

"Thanks for the noise, lady," he said. "I wondered what happened to our friend, here!"

Le Gris did not carry a gun in plain view here in the honkatonk, and McMahon's colt was still holstered. But quick as Le Gris had come to his feet, his right hand moved up towards his shoulder under his frock coat, and snapped down again with a short-barreled .41. The two shots were almost simultaneous. But Le Gris was the one to fall. He crumpled there by the girl's feet. And she stared at him, amazed that he should be vulnerable, even as her father had been, whom he had terrorized so long.

Then she glanced up and saw McMahon slumping against the door jamb. The rythm of the music downstairs had broken, giving the girl warning. She called to McMahon to watch out, and, as if in a daze, he smiled back at her. She heard yelling downstairs in the hall that led to the steps. A shot clipped the top of the door. McMahon fell to his knees, safe for a moment. Then she was across the room, clutching her torn dress with one hand, pulling McMahon over the threshold with the other.

"They're coming," she said. "Up the stairs. . . ."

"Up the stairs?" he repeated after her.

"Can you use this gun?" she asked.

He nodded his head and she passed the Colt over to him. When the third bullet came, he was able to answer it. But she knew that he could not fight them off alone. She ran back across the room to get the gun that Le Gris had used.

And Le Gris was there on his stomach, propped up on his elbow, pointing the weapon for McMahon's back. The glaze of death was already coming into Le Gris' eyes—he couldn't see very well. The movement of the girl distracted his aim. Before he could realign the gun she had snatched it from his hand. He fell on his face then, and over all the turmoil she could hear him gasping for breath and crying out in the darkness that was sweeping over him.

"Sally—Sally!"

There was such pitiful appeal in his voice she lost precious seconds and knelt beside him. His eyes opened. There was a strange, soft light in them.

"I knew you'd come back," he was saying. "I'm sorry for all I did." Then he seemed puzzled. "No . . . You're not Sally. You're Sally's kid; Spike's kid. I killed Spike, kid. Shot him in cold blood. That feller McMahon only winged him. I was the one who killed him. He married the woman I wanted. That's why I hated him. That dress you've got on—belonged to her. This room was hers, too—before Connors came and took her away. Now beat it, kid, with that feller McMahon. He's okay. . . ."

Sally O'Connor was trembling violently as she knelt there beside the dying man. There was none of the wolf left in that last faint smile of his.

"McMahon is a lucky feller, Sally, kid. He got out in the scuffle downstairs when you kicked Slug. He'll get you out of here, too. Now beat it, kid—with that lucky feller. . . ."

Sally's hand touched his forehead lightly. Then she was on her feet again, and he was dead there on the floor. She ran over to Bart McMahon who had driven back the charging gunmen for the moment. In her hand she held Le Gris' gun.

"Come on," she whispered. "Load up. We got to get out of here. They'll get us if we stay. We gotta chance a run. . . ."

There in the safety of the door they re-

loaded their guns. Their blue eyes met in challenge and courage. Those two would get away.

Side by side, feeling each other close, they worked down the stairs into the black hallway below. Dead men cluttered the steps. And in the face of that withering fire the remaining henchmen of the dead honkatong king had no more stomach for fighting.

THEY found horses, the man and the girl, and rode away into the night, side by side, as they had fought their way out of that honkatonk. They did not talk as they rode along. They said nothing at all until their horses stopped on the top of a small hill and they faced the rosy dawn of a new sunrise. Then, again, their eyes met as they had up there in the room that was full of death.

"Le Gris," Bart said, "is dead, along with his mob. . . ." He was silent for a moment, and then: "I wonder if it was all worth it?"

"It was," she said. "He died like a man—at least. He told me, before he died many things, and I guessed some more. But he died—like a man!"

"What do you mean?" he asked her. "What was your connection. . . .?"

"Le Gris was my father's enemy," she told him. "Le Gris used to love my mother. But pop got her, and Le Gris hounded him all the rest of his life. Mother used to live up there in that room. And Le Gris—" There was a deep sadness in her eyes. "Le Gris blackmailed pop into that holdup. Then he shot him when father objected to their killing your brother!"

"You mean—?"

"You were a bad shot. You only clipped his arm."

"When did you learn that?" he asked, excitedly.

"Only just before Le Gris died. I thought you had done it, before. You said that—"

The two horses were standing very close together. The man and the girl were almost touching.

"Yet you helped me get away downstairs? Even when you thought—?"

She flushed. "Sure," she said. "I couldn't help it."

It was the man's turn to flush, then. "Even after I looked at you that way? Even when I thought you were only a honkatonk queen—and insulted you?"

She smiled at him. She didn't want to talk any more. She wondered if he would take her in his arms soon and kiss her. The torn dress that had been her mother's seemed to give her then some of the wiles that she had to use on him. Apparently he was even more bashful than she.

"What's wrong with a honkatonk queen?" she asked, her eyes sparkling. "My mother was a honkatonk girl, once. And this dress. . . ."

"You look kinda bare in that dress," he said.

She pulled it up closer around her neck. Then she said, modestly: "I wonder if you could hook it for me, up the back."

He tried, and the first thing he knew one of his arms was completely around her. "But there are no hooks," he said.

"I knew that!" The girl laughed. And for the briefest moment blue eyes looked into blue.

"You sure learned fast for a dance-hall gal," he said.

Both his two arms were around her. And neither of them felt as if they'd ever want to break away again. . . .

THE END

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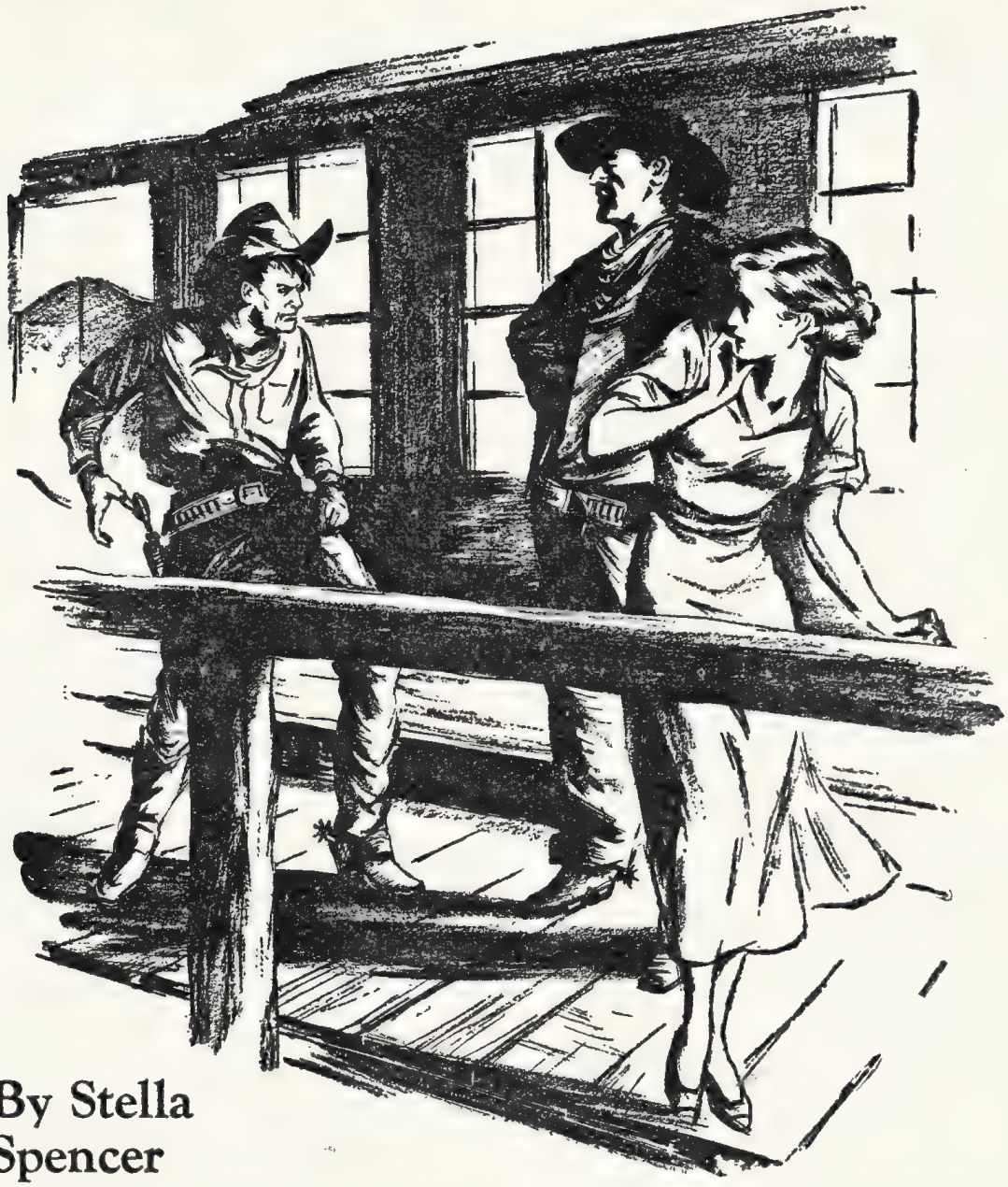


By Stella Spencer

Patsy Jordan was fighting to save her little ranch and the brother she loved so dearly. Yet her only ally was a stranger who once said: "All Ted Jordan's good for is to feed buzzards. Somebody ought to . . ."

ON THE outskirts of Target, Patsy Jordan pulled her sweating pony to a walk. She looked like a slender boy in overalls and half-boots with a holstered .32 resting against her slim leg. But the riot of midnight curls beneath her sombrero, and her soft, red lips were appealingly, definitely feminine.

The little Texas town lay silvered by a crescent moon. Almost in the mouth of Crooked Canyon, its single row of buildings faced a rocky cliff. Squares of

light from open saloon doors studded the plank walk. At the end of the street stood the jail, darkly forbidding.

Necessity had brought Patsy here on an errand she dreaded; an errand which might, after all, prove futile. Her troubled eyes scanned the horses at the hitching rails as she walked her pinto slowly along the street. Yes—there was Ted's roan mare!

Reluctantly she dismounted, started toward the saloon door. Raucous laughter, mingled with curses, sent little shivers running along her spine. She hesitated just beyond the square of light, wondering what she could do if Ted were drunk and refused to come.

Just then a big man in chaps and gun-belt stalked through the door, almost knocking her down. He grabbed her arm, held her up.

"Steady there, kid!"

Surprise swept over his face; surprise that changed quickly to admiration. "Excuse me, ma'am. I—why, I reckoned you was a boy!" His fine, firm mouth curved in a smile that, in some miraculous way, wiped the hardness from his face, leaving it warm and youthful looking. Intense relief flooded Patsy. A smile like that was a guarantee of help and protection.

"My brother, Ted Jordan, is in that saloon," she said. "Will you bring him out here, please?"

"I'd admire to do something even harder than that for you, ma'am."

She smiled back at him. "But that's quite an order. You see, he may not want to come."

"I see, ma'am. Well, I'll bring your brother out."

His smile, his soft, deep voice tugged at some hitherto untouched cord of her heart. When he went back into the saloon she moved over to the horses, thinking how different life might be with a big, strong man to shoulder the heavy burdens.

But her dusky eyes grew clouded when she saw the stranger guiding her brother through the door. Ted's face was flushed and he walked unsteadily, glancing around through heavy-lidded eyes. Seeing Patsy, he brought up with a jerk.

"Pat! What you followin' me 'round for?"

"You've got to come home, Ted! There's been another landslide—no water for the cattle."

He looked at her sourly. "Well, you go on home. I'll be there in the morning."

Patsy didn't dare to leave him. He'd drink himself sick. Besides, she couldn't clear out the creek alone. "Oh, Teddy, please. . . ."

Slowly the stranger forced his eyes from the loveliness of Patsy's troubled face, to her brother. He said pleasantly, "Better go home with your sister, Ted. Seems she's plumb in need of your help."

Ted turned on him with a snarl. "Mind your own business, waddy!"

"Right now, my business is helpin' your sister." The man's voice was not raised, but the friendliness had gone out of it.

Patsy saw Ted's hand move toward his six-shooter. Panic held her dumb. Every muscle in her body seemed suddenly paralyzed. But the cowboy didn't reach for his gun. His voice changed, cut through the air like a whip-lash.

"Fork your horse, young fella!"

For the fraction of a second Ted hesitated; then his eyes dropped and he swaggered over to his horse. Patsy felt warm blood flowing through her veins again. She mounted hurriedly, sending a smile of gratitude to the cowboy.

BUT as she turned her pony, a rangy bay sided her, and again she heard the voice that had such a disturbing effect on her heart: "Reckon I'll ride a ways with you, ma'am. Your brother seems to

be plumb fractious. Might be needin' a steadyin' hand like mine."

Astride his horse, he loomed big in the moonlight, looking strong and dependable. Again that strange, new quiver stirred Patsy's heart.

"I'm glad of the chance to thank you," she said. "You've helped me a lot, cowboy. I'm Pätsy Jordan. Ted and I own a small ranch that was once part of the J Bar T." She saw him stiffen. He seemed to be looking at her queerly. Even his voice sounded different:

"The J Bar T? You mean—the Tolliver spread?"

"Yes," she told him. "That's where I was born. It belonged to Dad once." But she wanted to know more about this cowboy. "Do you work around here?"

"Haven't been here long. Name's Bill —er—Bill Smith, ma'am."

She noticed the hesitation, but told herself rebelliously that names weren't important. Hadn't Shakespeare said, "What's in a name?"

Riding in the wake of Ted's dust, she told him of her childhood on the J Bar T —then the J Bar; told him how her father, in the last years of his life, had fallen for the trickery of the Tollivers who had finally stripped him of everything. But they were almost home before she could bring herself to say, "I'll have no more trouble with Ted. You don't need to come any farther."

The cowboy looked disappointed. "Why, I'd feel right oneasy to leave you now, ma'am. I reckoned to see you safe home."

Patsy knew there was no need for that. But almost before she realized it, her reply slipped out. "Then we'll be glad to have you come with us, Bill."

When they turned into the yard with the three-room house, pole corral and barn, Ted dropped dizzily from the saddle. "I feel rotten, Pat. Take care of Queen, will you?" Without waiting for an answer, ignoring the cowboy, he went into the house.

Bill volunteered to take care of the horses. Patsy pointed out the small bunkhouse, and followed Ted. But when she reached the veranda, she turned to look back. The big cowboy was already unsaddling, moving with a swinging rhythm unusual in so large a man.

She went on in, tip-toed past Ted who was already asleep on the couch, and shut herself in her bedroom. Undressing slowly, she thought of the cattle without water and of tomorrow's task of clearing the creek. But when she slept, her dreams were all of a broad-shouldered stranger whose stern face grew tender as he smiled at her.

THE next morning Ted's face looked pale beneath its tan. When he said, "Sorry about last night," Patsy thought ruefully that Ted was always as regretful of the last drinking bout as he was alert for the next one.

Ted drank some coffee, saying, "I'll get out to the creek right away. How about that waddy who trailed you home? Want me to send him in for breakfast?"

Turning to hide her fiery cheeks, she said, "Yes. And I'll be out to help you soon."

A few minutes later, Bill appeared in the doorway, and Patsy had her first daylight look at him. She noted the sandy hair, neatly brushed; wide-set gray eyes in a bronzed, square-jawed face, and a mouth that most certainly knew how to smile.

"Your brother was plumb civil, ma'am. Asked me to have breakfast. But I don't want to be no bother—"

"Of course you'll have breakfast! Like hotcakes?"

"Do I? Say!" He sat down at the wooden table, and Patsy busied herself

with the hotcakes. She wore a blue cotton dress this morning, and knew that his admiring eyes were following her. The hot stove was not entirely responsible for the radiant flush of her soft cheeks.

After his third helping of hotcakes, Bill said, "If you'll lead me to this landslide, Ma'am, I'll help your brother clear out the creek."

"What! A cowboy offering to dig ditches?" she laughed. But she was thankful for the help, and hurried into boots and overalls, while Bill saddled.

As they galloped over the range, Patsy pointed out two low-lying hills. "Badger Creek runs there. This fence separates our place from the J Bar T. Oh, that's a grand old ranch! I reckon I'll always love it."

Bill's face grew troubled. "An' now it belongs to th' Tollivers?"

"To Lon Tolliver. And if his father hadn't cheated Dad—Oh, I shouldn't say that! Both old men are dead now." Her dark eyes grew wistful, as she added slowly, "Sometimes I wonder why Lon should have everything, while Ted and I—Oh, things get worse and worse for us."

"What kind of things?"

She made a hopeless little gesture. "Fires—rustlers—water. Badger Creek is our only water supply, and these slides always occur just beyond the boundary line."

Bill's eyes narrowed. "Your hard luck—seems like it started just about the time this Tolliver outfit arrived in these parts," he said savagely.

"Well, you see, Lon wants me to marry him. He thinks if he makes it tough enough for us, we'll lose the place, and then I—" She broke off, to say passionately, "But I'll never marry any one I don't love!" Her own words startled her, and she added, "I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

But Bill said earnestly, "I'm plumb interested, ma'am. An' if you can make use of a extra hand, I'll be right proud to join your outfit."

Patsy's heart leaped at the thought of passing her troubles along to this man, who looked so capable of handling any situation. But she reined her fractious heart up sharply. "Thanks, we can't afford that. I reckon we'll pull through somehow."

"Well, ma'am, I'll bet you a year's wages that I can put your place on a payin' basis in that time. If I do, we both win; if I don't, we both lose. Is it a bet?" His voice was eager.

Patsy gave him her hand. With shining eyes, she said, "It is! And now you must call me Patsy."

But her eyes clouded again when they came upon the bawling cattle, clustered around the dry creek bed. Crossing the boundary line, they came upon the slide, with Ted asleep under a willow. After examining the rock-strewn hill, Bill said grimly, "Mebby so, this slide is an act of nature—but it looks downright like *human nature*, to me.

The sun had dropped behind the hills when the three climbed, stiff-backed, into saddles. But water was flowing across the boundary line again and the cattle were quiet.

Irresponsible Ted accepted the new hand at his own bargain.

"He sure fell hard for you, Pat. All right—make the most of it, smart girl. But don't forget, we know nothing about this waddy."

Patsy didn't answer. Dreamy-eyed, she was wondering if Bill really had fallen for her. . . .

WHILE finishing supper a week later they heard a "Hullo!" out in the yard. "Lon Tolliver," Patsy sighed. "That means trouble of some kind."

She looked through the window at a

man seated on a brick-red stallion. Like his horse, he was big and showy. Seeing Patsy, his red lips parted in a flashing smile, his sombrero came off with a flourish and he bowed low in the saddle.

Lon swung himself from an expensive saddle. Two rich, pearl gunstocks peeked from the carved holsters on his crossed belts, and his silver spurs jangled as he walked across the veranda.

"Well, Pat, made up your mind to marry me, yet?"

Without trying to hide her aversion, she answered, "My mind has been traveling in the opposite direction."

He laughed unpleasantly. "Not feeling friendly?"

"Not after having two landslides in one month!"

"What! Another landslide? But if you'd marry me, you know—"

"I know. There wouldn't be any more slides."

With a feeling of disappointment, Patsy noticed that Bill had disappeared. She hated to think that he was trying to avoid Lon, but it looked supiciously like it.

And then her prediction of trouble was realized. Lon left, taking Ted with him. That meant a night of drinking and gambling, she thought, miserably. Lon took a vile pleasure in his evil influence over the boy. And they couldn't afford to lose the cattle and horses with which Ted would pay his gambling debts.

As the sound of hoof beats died away, Bill returned.

"I reckon you know I was hidin' from Lon Tolliver, Patsy. Not because I'm afraid, but—well, I'm askin' you to trust me; to help me keep out of his sight for awhile."

Patsy studied him, her face troubled. But his eyes were saying something to which she had but one answer:

"I do trust you, Bill."

When Ted didn't come home the next day, Patsy decided that he had ended up in Target. Bill said he would go after him. Following him into the yard, Patsy stood beside the bay horse and looked anxiously up into Bill's face. "You—you won't be rough with him? Bill, promise me!"

Bill stared down the road, his face hard. "That young colt needs gentlin'—an' it'll take spurs to do it." Then his eyes came back to Patsy, and the hardness melted out of his face. "It sort'a stampedes me to see you worryin' so, Patsy; makes me right onfriendly toward Ted. But I'll never harm as much as one hair on that empty head of his. That's a promise."

It was easy to have faith in Bill. And it was only what she expected when Ted came riding in with him the next morning. She never did know exactly what happened. Neither of them told her, and she didn't care to ask. But from then on, Ted's attitude toward Bill changed.

"You'd think that waddy owned the ranch," he complained to Patsy. "I'll bet that's what he's trying to do—get it away from us by some dirty trick."

"Then he's going about it in a strange way," Patsy said indignantly. "He sold those steers, after we've tried for six months to find a buyer. Now we can meet the interest on the mortgage Lon holds."

Fear and resentment showed in Ted's weak face. "All right—you think you're smart, picking up with a tough hombre like him. I don't like the look in his eyes. But you know it all! And if you find me with a bullet hole in my back some day, you'll know who put it there."

Although Patsy told herself that Ted was merely resentful, the predictions of the brother she loved, left her with a vague uneasiness.

Then, one night, she ran out to meet Bill, black curls disheveled, dusky eyes frantic. "Ted has gone! Must have gone to town, and he—he's taken the mortgage

money. . . . " Her whole body burned with shame at the confession, but she had to have Bill's help. Ted must be found before the money was gone.

Bill said grimly, "I'll high-tail into Target. That young renegade will be back here by mornin'."

Fiercely protective, Patsy cried, "Bill, don't you hurt him!"

He put his hand under her chin and turned up her face, flower-like in its mass of tumbled curls. "Patsy girl, I promised you never to hurt him, didn't I?"

Satisfied, she nodded dumbly, and watched him gallop off. The night seemed unending, and morning brought Bill home without Ted. And Ted had not been in Target.

THE next morning Bill said he had to mend fence. But Patsy was frantic with worry. She knew there were only two places where Ted could get liquor: Target and the Tolliver ranch house. He was probably at Lon's now, sleeping off the dissipation of the night. In feverish haste, she saddled her pinto and started for the J Bar T.

As she rode up to the wide veranda, Lon stepped through the door. With a bow of mock gallantry, he exclaimed, "Well, if it isn't the lovely Patsy!"

She had not expected to find Lon home at this hour. Now, she realized, there was small chance of seeing her brother. Without dismounting, she said, tonelessly, "I've come for Ted."

"But why come here?"

"Don't waste breath lying," she snapped. "We both know he is here. Are you going to let me take him home, or not?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree, this time, little spit-fire." Lon was enjoying himself thoroughly.

With an effort, Patsy kept her voice steady. "I see. Ted still has some money left. Well, when you get it all, will you send him home please?"

"You're a spirited little bronc—and I like 'em with spirit." All at once Lon Tolliver's eyes were hot with desire. "I want you, Patsy. And some day you'll learn that I always get what I want."

A hint of fear crept in to mingle with Patsy's anger and disgust and disappointment. She turned her horse, and Lon's voice cut sharply on her ears:

"If you're thinking about that cow poke who's been hanging around you, forget him! He won't be here long. When coyotes that are afraid to come out in the open get troublesome I go after 'em!"

She galloped off, thinking miserably that even had she wanted to answer, there was nothing to say.

BILL saw her coming and leaned against a rail, waiting. She pulled the pinto to a plunging stop, and said, breathlessly:

"We've got to get Ted! If he isn't in Target, then he must be at the J Bar T. Will you go there after him, Bill?"

Bill stared out over the range, his face hard as granite. "That onery young fool! All he's good for is to feed the buzzards. Somebody ought to—" His lips clamped and he continued to stare out over the billowing land.

Patsy was puzzled, a little alarmed. Was he going to refuse? But Bill's eyes returned to her, and his face grew tender. He took her small hand in both of his, said huskily, "Poor little Patsy. I— It stampedes me to see you look that-a-way."

"Then you will go after Ted? You know, you are bound to run into Lon sooner or later, Bill. And I feel sure Ted is there."

Bill didn't answer—just stared out over the range. Patsy had stopped thinking about the money. Now she was fighting

to save the brother she loved. "Bill, you—you aren't afraid of Lon, are you?"

"No," he said slowly. "An' I'll get that young outlaw for you—if I have to drag him home on the end of a rope."

She couldn't quite understand the look in his eyes. Then Bill smiled, and it made Patsy think things might not be as bad as they seemed. She watched him swing into the saddle with an easy grace that, somehow, reminded her of Lon. She turned homeward with a feeling of relief. Bill would get Ted. The money—well, nothing was as important as her beloved brother.

But her relief was short-lived. Bill came back alone. "Ted wasn't there," he explained.

She could scarcely believe it. "Sure? Did you see Lon?"

"Sure. Yes, I saw Lon."

Patsy's knees felt weak. She sat on the veranda, and leaned against the house with her slim legs out straight before her. Bill dismounted and sat down on the steps, leaving his horse with grounded reins. The trouble in Patsy's face seemed to be reflected in his own, as he said, "No use lookin' for Ted. Think I'll start lookin' up another buyer, instead. You got to make up that money."

"Yes, the home must be here when Ted's ready to come back to it."

Bill heaved himself off the steps, looking at her uneasily. "Then I reckon I'll start right pronto." He drew his six-shooter, broke it, pulled out an empty shell and threw it in the grass. Then replaced it with one from his cartridge belt.

Patsy watched him with half-seeing eyes. She was still thinking about Ted. She asked, scarcely conscious of what she said:

"Shoot something, Bill?"

"Yeah. A rattlesnake."

"Lots of them around this year," she said, still absently, still with her mind on Ted. With an effort, she brought herself back to her surroundings. After all, it was vitally important to make up that lost money. "Where are you going to look for a buyer, Bill?"

"I ain't right sure. Maybe Target—or out Red Canyon way." He brought a blanket from the bunk house, fastened it on his saddle. "May be gone three-four days."

A feeling of desolate loneliness came over Patsy. Ted had deserted, and now Bill—She went over to stand beside him, and suddenly choked out, "Don't—don't leave me, Bill."

In a second, his arms were around her, holding her in a tight grip. He whispered, "I wouldn't go if I didn't have to, honey girl. What I'm doin' is all for you. Some day you'll understand." His firm, good-looking lips found hers, and in the thrill of that first kiss, Patsy forgot everything but the glorious reality of their love.

A HALF HOUR later—she was still sitting on the veranda—two J Bar T cowboys galloped furiously into the yard. She sprang up, a wild fear tugging at her heart.

"Ted—?"

"Yeah. We found him near the boundary line—shot in the back. Must'a bin dead two-three hours. We took him up tuh the house."

The world began to spin around Patsy. The cowboys were grotesque, distorted shapes. Their voices seemed to come from a great distance.

"Lon'll be here right soon. He sez the new hand yuh got here wuz up tuh the house this mornin' gunnin' fer Ted; threatened tuh shoot him on sight. It wuz him done it, all right. But we'll git the skunk! We're goin' tuh Target fer the sheriff."

Patsy groped her way into the house,

but the familiar room was strangely changed. The couch—where Ted would never sleep again. . . The mirror—that would never reflect back the image of his beloved face. . . The battered chair—that he would never again pull up to the wooden table. . .

She pressed her hands to her burning eyes. Bill had said, once: "—all he's good for is to feed the buzzards. Somebody ought to—" Then she remembered Bill shaking out that empty cartridge. She heard herself asking. "Shoot something?" and his reply, "A rattlesnake." She felt as though her heart were being torn, ripped apart. Then it grew cold, frozen. She was no longer in doubt. Bill had shot her brother. And she would make him pay—

A clatter of hoofs in the yard drew her dazed glance through the window. On the instant, she became quiveringly alert. Trembling, she reached for her holstered gun hanging against the wall. With the gun in her hands, her nerves became steady. She stood just within the door, waiting.

A jangle of spurs on the veranda was followed by Bill's voice, "Pat!" He stepped through the door. "Forgot my canteen. Might need it crossin'—"

Bill stared past the gun, into the white face behind it, into dusky eyes that seemed burning wells of hate.

"Put up your hands, you killer!"

With his hands in the air, Bill said mildly, "Do you mind tellin' me what it's all about, Patsy?"

Without answering, she took his gun and threw it far into the yard, as though it were a poison thing. As Lon's horse turned into the yard, she called, "Careful! I've got the killer here."

Lon entered with his gun in his hand. Within five minutes, Bill was trussed up on the little veranda to await the coming of the sheriff. Those waiting hours were like a nightmare to Patsy, but they passed and finally the sheriff came and left with his prisoner.

In a vain effort to shut out the picture of Bill, handcuffed and with a face as immobile as marble, Patsy buried her eyes in the cushion that had pillowed Ted's wayward head.

Again she could hear Bill's voice, but it carried a different message this time; "—never harm as much as one hair on his empty head—" She tried to close her ears to it, but the soft, deep voice persisted. She tried to hate him—but it was no use. She couldn't hate him because—she loved him! "Oh, God," she whispered, brokenly, "why must I love him?"

As if in answer to that prayer, something entirely separate from herself seemed to say, "You love him because you have faith in him." And suddenly she knew, quite positively, and beyond any possibility of a doubt, that the man she loved had not shot her brother.

Now her heart pounded with a new fear. They would hang Bill! But she couldn't let them do that. She must save him— There was one possible way. She would take it!

IT WAS long after midnight when she topped the hill facing Target. She started downward, a little toward the north, above town. The horses went carefully, picking their way down the steep, rocky incline. Leaving them in the bottom of the canyon, she scrambled up the short hill on the opposite side. Then she was crouched behind the jail.

She was calm now, with that icy calmness which comes with the last throw of the dice—for life or death. Drawing her .32, she moved around until she saw the jailer, sitting in a tilted chair against the door. In boots and overalls, her sombrero

pulled low over her eyes, she banked on being taken for a boy.

"Up with your hands!"

The man reached for the sky. She took his gun and slipped it into her own holster. "Now, unlock that door."

Her heart seemed to stop beating when he hesitated, peering at her closely. Then, with a shrug, he unlocked the door, and Bill loomed up in the darkness.

"This is Patsy. Hurry, Bill! There's a rope around my waist—to tie him. Use your bandana for a gag—I'll keep him covered."

Bill flew into action. He took the slender rawhide rope from her waist, and trussed up the unhappy jailor. Then taking the jailor's gunbelt and .45, they left him tied on the floor, and, hand in hand, as dawn broke, they ran toward the canyon. "I brought Lightnin'," Patsy said. "He'll get you over the Border, into Mexico."

Bill's hand tightened around hers. "I didn't know what happened 'till the sheriff told me, Pat."

She shivered. "I know. I went crazy, but— See, here are the horses."

Daylight was beginning to crimson the sky, as Bill took Patsy in his arms. With her own arms tight around his neck, her soft body crushed against his, she whispered, "I'm going with you."

Then they swung into the saddles. Their speed was retarded by a heavy growth of mesquite and cactus in the canyon bottom. On both sides the walls rose sheer and straight, topped by a rim of boulders outlined against the sky. But Bill kept Lightnin' close to the pinto. He had something to say to Patsy:

"I want you to know why I aimed to steer clear of Lon Tolliver for awhile. Lon is my half-brother. But we never herded together. He went to some high-toned school in the east—I been on my own since I was a kid. But when our father died, he left the J Bar T to the both of us. I was headin' there when I met up with you."

Patsy was too much concerned with their danger to feel astonishment. She said, "What does all that matter, now?"

But Bill continued: "Seein' that Lon was up to his usual dirty tricks, I aimed to get more information before showin' myself. I reckoned I could get enough on him to make him give back what belonged to you—even if it was the whole J Bar T spread."

Patsy cried sharply, "Listen! What's that?"

The morning air brought the faint metallic ring of hoofs against rock. Quickly it grew louder. There was the sharp crack of a revolver, and a bullet creased Bill's Stetson. He drew his gun and pulled the plunging Lightnin' up.

"You've got to go back, Pat," Bill grasped. "They won't fire at you."

Patsy looked up. A dozen riders were urging their horses along the canyon's edge. She dug her heels into the pinto, crying, "Come on, Bill! I'm not going back. The draw's just ahead. If we can reach it first—" Sensing the uselessness of argument, Bill held Lightnin' down to the pinto's pace.

Fear leaped into her eyes when she heard Lon's voice: "Come on, boys—we've got him trapped!"

With his silk neckerchief flying in the breeze, he leaned forward and his silver spurs raked the sides of the stallion. The animal, already excited, reared and pawed the air furiously. Then his hind feet struck a ledge of ancient, broken rock. The rock crumbled—slid downward in a little rattling shower.

With a scream of terror, the stallion went over backward. His rider catapulted from the saddle, followed his mount into the yawning maw of the canyon. Turning,

twisting, somersaulting, they hurtled downward.

A FEW minutes later, the sheriff, who had spurred ahead, found Bill and Patsy standing beside Lon Tolliver's still form. Feeling that the end of the world had come, Patsy watched him slip the handcuffs on Bill's wrists.

The man at their feet stirred, groaned weakly. "I'm—done for. Never—get home alive."

The sheriff leaned over awkwardly and, in an effort to say something comforting, blurted out:

"We got our man, Lon."

The ghost of Lon's old, flashing smile touched his lips. "Yes—got your man—but too late. I shot Ted Jordan. Nothing against—the kid, but—"

Patsy recoiled as if a cobra had struck at her. Lon's glazing eyes followed her. With an effort, he called up his last fleeting energy, and choked out:

"I figgered it'd help get rid of Bill—somehow—"

The sheriff turned to Bill. "I reckon that was straight from the hip. Th' law's got no further use for you, son."

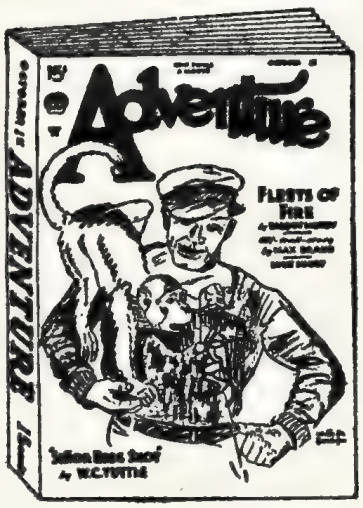
Bill led Patsy toward their horses. She clung to his arm fiercely, as though she would never let it go, and her dusty eyes were heavy with tears.

"Ted's death is avenged. But, Oh, Bill, there's so much to forget before I can be happy!"

Regardless of the gaping posse that followed the sheriff, Bill's arms went around her.

"I know, sweet. But right soon I'll be takin' you home to the J Bar T. There, on the old ranch you love, I'll help you to forget the hard goin'."

Looking up into his face, Patsy felt comforted. Even now, it was hard to remember anything except that Bill's strong, protecting arms were around her.



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WILDERNESS

They said that Rol Corby was a spy sent to that outlaw refuge by the law. But all Hope Adair knew was that his flashing, kindly smile filled her heart with a strange new sweetness. Later, when all the camp was up in arms against him, she rode to him in the moonlight, bringing breathless warning of her father's angry guns.

THAT morning Hope put on the dress that a Bannock squaw had given her father. There was a little waist of doe-skin, as soft as velvet, dyed a mellow yellow, and there was a short skirt of the same soft material. The waist fitted her young body warmly—not too tightly, but snug enough to reveal the

SWEETHEARTS

A Glamorous Novelette of the Mountain Country

abundant loveliness that was hers. The skirt came just below her knees. A shaft of the morning May sun striking through the window wrought a path of gold through her hair that shamed the gold of Indian dye in the dress. And there was life abundant in Hope's step as she came down the stairs of the big, log walled ranch house.

Nathan Adair was standing before the fireplace talking to a man—a stranger. Their talk stopped so abruptly when they heard her foot on the stair that it disconcerted her, and so she paused there in the doorway a moment. Her father, turning, saw her framed there, a lovely statue in golden buckskin—motionless, and yet so intensely alive! His deep set eyes lighted with a flash that lived only for an instant.

"Going for the mail, daughter?" he asked her.

She nodded, tugging at a buckskin

glove. When she looked up the stranger's eyes were fixed on her and she saw his face.

Never had she seen a more patently wicked face. Not only was it broad and brutish, but it was cunning; and when the man bared his teeth in what was doubtless meant for a smile, she saw that the eye-teeth on either side were long and pointed —like fangs. He was taller even than her father and powerfully built. She suddenly felt all trembly inside, but she spoke casually to her father:

"The Gap is open now. I thought we might have a letter from Uncle Jobe or Aunt Drusie."

"You might inquire if there's any word of that lion hunter I sent out for," said her father and then turned back to the stranger.

As she passed through the room, Hope unconsciously walked as far as possible from the man. Outside, Berry Wingo had her horse ready. Berry Wingo was the only one of all the men that came and went there, that had been at her father's ranch ever since she could remember.

Hope's eyes clouded when she saw that he held but a single horse ready. "I thought you might ride with me today, Berry, since it's my first trip out this spring," she said.

Berry Wingo's weathered face brightened. "That's shore nice of you, honey," he replied. "Now, if I was thirty years younger I reckon I'd be some set up over it. I am anyhow. But I can't go today. Mebby next time."

She smiled at him a bit sadly, then climbed aboard her horse and rode away alone.

THE forks of the river, spreading fanwise, enclosed the little basin on three sides. On the fourth—the south—the mighty rampart of the Sawtooth Range, split only by Sentinel Gap, stood in eternal and immobile attention. It was a ten mile climb to the Gap from the Adair ranchhouse, then ten down to the little village of Sentinal.

Snow lay on either side of the Gap as Hope rode through, but the wind was gentle and temperate. Twice she saw early spring flowers growing bravely at the very edge of retreating snowbanks.

When she dismounted before the plank platform that fronted the store, which was also the post office, she noticed a powerfully built saddle horse drooping there in an attitude of extreme fatigue. And when she entered the place a tall and broad-shouldered man was tacking a poster over the window through which mail was passed. His back was turned and she heard him say to the storekeeper and postmaster:

"I'll give him a chance. But I reckon I'll have to take a force in there and clean out that Hole. It's been needin'—"

The postmaster saw her then and some silent signal must have passed between the two men, for the big one broke off abruptly and whirled with the quickness of a cougar.

Hope saw the face of a mature man, with bold, strong features and gray eyes. There was a little silver badge on his vest and the butt of a worn six-shooter jutted from an equally worn holster.

Hope knew at once that he was some officer of the law; power and authority seemed to emanate from him. Then she was aware that the postmaster was speaking.

"This is Nathan Adair's daughter."—Then to her—"This is Marshal Lundy, Miss Hope."

The big marshal touched his hat with a gesture of grave courtesy. His voice was even and deep, "Tell your father," he said to her, "that if he don't come out to see me, I reckon I'll have to come in to see

him. You can remember to say it exactly that way?"

She nodded and he stepped aside to allow her to come to the mail window. The postmaster seemed slow in finding their mail, and while she waited she raised her eyes to the poster that Marshal Lundy had just tacked up—and received the second shock of the morning. For the picture on the notice was the same brutish face that had greeted her at home when she came down the stairway. Below the picture, in bold black type, was the word: WANTED; and a name.

"Just a letter," said the postmaster, and passed it through the window.

It bore a Utah postmark, and the handwriting was her uncle's. It was addressed to her father. If Aunt Drusie had written, the letter would have been addressed to Hope. They wrote every spring, always urging that she be allowed to come and visit them.

She tucked the letter under her belt. As she went out she felt, rather saw the marshal's keen eyes upon her. . . .

WHEN she came out on the wooden platform fronting the store she saw, down the road leading to Shoshone, a rider approaching. He was leading a pack animal which was loaded high and heavily. Two great stag-hounds that trotted at the horses' heels reminded her of her father's request to ask about the lion hunter. So after she mounted her horse she rode a short distance down the road and stopped to wait for the stranger.

This man rode with an indolent grace that told of youth and natural riding ability. He reined in beside her and lifted his dusty Stetson awkwardly and grinned with a boyish shyness. She saw that he was very young; that his face was burned as brown as the leather of his saddle. But his teeth flashed white against the brown and his eyes were as blue as the mountain lake above her home. He looked straight at her with an engaging frankness.

"I'm headed for Nathan Adair's place," he told her, and after a pause, "I'm a lion hunter."

She nodded. "We're expecting a lion hunter, but father never told me his name." Then she laughed gayly. "I don't think he knows it himself."

"The name is Rol—Corby," said the young man. She noticed his hesitation and wondered a little. "Who are you?"

"Why I'm Hope—Adair," she said pausing as he had before the surname; and then to make up for that said quickly, "I'm just starting home."

"That's fine—I mean, I'll ride along if you don't mind," he said.

They rode almost to the top of the Gap with hardly a word being spoken. Then when they broke through the narrow, rocky defile and the basin below was visible she arose in her stirrups and pointed with her eyes shining and the color warm in her cheeks.

"That's ours. I've never been anyplace else, but to me it's the prettiest sight in the world from here. You can see the silver threads of the river, and the sun on our lake. Some days the lake matches the sky perfectly."

"It does today," he agreed, looking first at the valley then at her. "But not half as well as that dress matches your hair."

She tied a useless knot in her reins. "Do you think you'll catch a lot of lions?" she asked. "I hope you do. They're killing our young horses."

"I hope there's a lot to catch," he replied firmly, and then when she looked at him questioningly, he added shyly, "Then I'll get to stay a long time."

She flushed and her spur bit harshly. Her horse flattened into a run. Beside her young Rol's horse kept pace, and the huge stag-hounds raced along, tongues lolling as if enjoying a game. Behind

them the pack horse gave a few clattering jumps, then subsided to his steady plod again. The wind poured in their ears, fresh and warm. There was an exuberance in its caress. Rol Corby looked across and grinned understandingly.

"Sort of lifts you up—inside, don't it?" he said.

She pulled her horse in instantly. "Do you feel that way about it too?" she asked. "Berry Wingo always laughs when I try to tell him how I feel somethimes. All springy inside," she explained.

"I've felt it too," he confessed readily.

When they rode in at the ranch Berry Wingo stepped out from the barn to take her horse. She explained who Rol was and Berry sent him in to talk to her father.

"Nothin' but a kid," he grumbled to Hope after Rol had disappeared inside.

"Why, he's bigger than you are, Berry," she said smiling. "And they're nice dogs, aren't they."

"The dogs are all right," replied Berry, "but that feller ain't got enough hair on his chin." Then he brought his horny palm across his own bristly stubble. "Why didn't he tie his hoss? I got work to do."

"I'll hold him," said Hope.

Berry handed her the reins, when she dismounted, and took her horse to the stable. Rol Corby came out the house shortly. He took the reins from her and smiled his thanks.

"I'm to stay in a cabin up by the lake," he said, then added in a much lower tone: "Do you ever ride *that* way?"

"Sometimes," she answered in a voice even lower than his. Then she turned away quickly and entered the house.

HER father was sprawled in his favorite chair before the fireplace where a single log blazed moderately. It was always coolish in that big room, except during the extreme heat of summer which was never very great at that altitude.

"Here's a letter from Uncle Jobe, father," she said.

He raised his bearded chin from his chest and took the letter.

"Your Aunt may have written to you," he said, "the letter is thick. No"—after he had opened it and glanced through the sheets—"just to me. But wait."

Hope waited. He was a long time reading the letter, and after he had read it he sat perfectly still, gazing into the fire. He seemed to have forgotten that she was there. Then he turned to her slowly.

"Jobe still wants you to come and see them. He says I'm acting selfish in keeping you here. Perhaps he's right. But you haven't been unhappy here with me, have you?"

Hope came to him quickly and playfully tweaked his great ear. "Unhappy!" she exclaimed with disdain. "No one could have been happier. Father, who was that man you were talking to when I left for the mail?"

"No one that you would have any concern about," he told her evasively.

"Was it Matt Girty?" she persisted.

His heavy brows snapped up. "What do you know about Matt Girty?" he asked severely.

"I saw his picture in the postoffice," she explained. "He's a criminal—"

He stopped her instantly. "A *fugitive,* daughter. There's a vast difference. The *law,*" he spat out the word as if it were distasteful to him, "can make a fugitive out of any man. But only he himself can make himself a criminal. Are you sure it was his picture?"

"No one could mistake *his* picture," she returned positively. "A big man—Marshal Lundy—put it up. And he sent a message to you. He said—wait, he said to give it exactly as he said it—'tell your father if he don't come out to see me, I

reckon I'll have to come *in* to see him'. Those were his exact words, father."

Nathan Adair sprang from his chair with an agility that was astounding for a man of his years. His eyes blazed and his hands closed with a convulsive gesture. The letter, still held in his right hand was crumpled savagely into a compact ball. The crackle as it broke seemed to have a quieting effect on him. He sat down suddenly and seemed to relax.

"Are you sure the man's name was Lundy? Describe him more fully."

She did so, and added. "I know he was a law officer, father. He wore a badge and he had that air of authority that even I couldn't mistake. I know—"

The door opened suddenly then, and Berry Wingo came in hurriedly, followed by Matt Girty. Hope saw a significant look pass between Berry and her father.

"Run on up to your room, daughter," he said. Then after she had gone he turned back to Berry, and Girty: "What is it?"

"He can tell you," Berry jabbed his thumb at Girty.

"It's about this lion hunter," said Girty, speaking out of the corner of his mouth. "Where does he hail from and who does he claim to be?"

"I wrote my brother, down in Utah, to send me up a good man," explained Adair, watching Girty closely. "This is him. His name is Corby."

"Corby, *hell*," burst out Girty. "His name is *Lundy*. Son of that hell-hound of the law. He's no lion hunter!"

Again Nathan Adair sprang to his feet. "Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Dead shore!" said Girty. "Now me and my men have got to move on or we've got to git him, and git him quick. Which will it be?"

Nathan Adair took two turns up and down the room. "For the present, neither," he said, decisively. "You are right, I have a way of my own of dealing with spies. But I've got to be sure. Berry, go get a horse ready for me. Girty, you keep yourself and men close to the bunkhouse. I'm going to see Marshal Lundy."

But Girty was not to be dismissed so summarily. "What I want to know," he said truculently, "is whether me and my men can bank on you. We don't aim to camp right here and let you bring in a posse of federal men to take us like sheep. We want to *know* where we stand."

Nathan Adair's eyes flashed angrily.

"For twenty years I've been giving refuge to fugitives from the law," he said crisply. "No living man, fugitive or not, can say I ever betrayed a trust. And no law officer ever took a fugitive from this place, and no law officer ever shall! Least of all, Marshal Lundy."

"That's all I wanted to know," said Girty.

CHAPTER TWO

Mountain Moonlight

FROM her window upstairs Hope saw her father mount and ride away. Then Matt Girty went back to the bunkhouse and Berry Wingo brought a strange horse out of the barn and led him down to the stream for water.

The horse was a blood bay with black points. He had a short white blaze over his right nostril that gave him a rowdyishly playful expression. When he drank he plunged his head avidly into the water and gulped swiftly; then he tossed his head aloft and stood looking off into the hills, apparently listening. Even from that distance Hope saw his smooth body suddenly tense, his mouth open and he sent a ringing call winging up the valley.

Hope caught her breath. Brought up to appreciate and know good horses, this ani-

mal took away her breath. She ran down the stairs and was waiting at the barn door when Berry led the horse back.

"Berry," she said reprovingly, "I don't believe you like me any more! Why didn't you tell me we had a new horse? Why didn't you have my saddle on him this morning? Isn't he a beauty!"

Berry just stood there and wagged his head at everything she said with a sort of helpless look on his face.

"Put my saddle on him now, Berry—there's plenty of time for a gallop," she said.

Berry hesitated. "I can't, Miss Hope," he replied.

She stamped her foot. Few were the things she had ever been denied at that inland empire of her father's. "He won't hurt me. You know I can ride. Besides I know he's not bad. No horse could be bad with a head as good as his. Why, he looks almost as if he could talk!"

"It ain't that I'm afraid he'll hurt you," Berry replied. "He ain't our horse. Now you just hold on and mebby I can fix it so's you can ride him tomorrow."

Hope looked at him directly. "Is he Matt Girty's horse, Berry?"

Berry looked at her quickly, nodded, then led the horse into the barn. Hope went slowly back to the house with a feeling of bafflement and wonder. So many things had happened that day to surprise and puzzle her, more than in all her previous life, it seemed.

THAT night, alone in the big house—for none ever slept there but herself and her father, not even Berry—she was aware for the first time in her life, of loneliness. Her mind persisted in remaining so active that sleep would not come. She kept thinking of the events of the day—of young Rol Corby's wholesome shyness, and the look in his eyes when he asked her if she ever rode up the lake way. He was so utterly different from the men that came and went there. . . .

From her bed she could see the silver lacing of the full moon through the shutters. Finally she arose and went to the window and threw the shutters wide—standing there clothed only in a sheer white gown which fell to her bare feet. Under the moonlight there was no telling where the gown left her breast and met her feet, for her skin was as white as the linen.

It was a night of unutterable beauty and witchery. Hardly a breath of air stirred, and the moon riding high over the Sawteeth, flooded the basin with a silver glory.

She could hear the gentle rush of the river, and somewhere high up, a great elk bugled sonorously. The sound, softened by distance came winging down the slope as musical as the note from a golden trumpet. Then up in the direction of the lake she heard a dog's deep bay; answered shortly by another. Down in the barn a horse suddenly neighed shrilly and struck the manger with an iron shod hoof. It was the blood bay—she recognized his call immediately. For horses, as well as people, have individuality in their voices.

Hope tingled. Up there somewhere Rol Corby was riding with his hounds! Riding by the moonlight. Riding alone.

The dogs' voices grew fainter, almost died away. Then a slight breeze sprang up. It pressed the gown against her body until it clung caressingly to every warm curve, and it brought back the voices of the dogs in a chorus that swelled louder and louder. Down at the barn the bay horse neighed again, with a frantic eagerness, and struck the manger. . . .

Hope turned back from the window with a gesture that was almost vehement. She threw off the gown and put on the buckskin dress of the day. She didn't take time to put on the high heeled riding boots, but thrust her feet into a pair of

moccasins that she used for bedroom slippers. She took no hat but buckled a leather gun belt about her slender waist before she left the room and stole silently down the stairs.

She knew there was little likelihood of her departure being discovered for the hour was late and the bunk house, where all the men slept, was some distance from the ranch house, over on the left bank of the river. So she went boldly to the barn and carried her saddle and bridle from the gear house into the moonlit corral. Then she led out the blood bay. He stood with his head very high, one of his short, wide-set ears working back and forth, his whole being tense, as if he were listening for some well known footstep or voice.

But when she touched his head he lowered it readily and opened his mouth for the bit. She swung the heavy saddle onto his round back which shone like a sheet of burnished silver under the moon rays. And the moment he felt her weight on the stirrup, he came up under her with a surge that was breath-taking.

HOPE didn't know where she was going, or why. All she knew was that the witchery of the night was calling, and that the big house which had sheltered her all these years had suddenly become a prison. She did know that somewhere up there in those moon-lit peaks young Rol Corby was riding with his hounds—and she wanted to ride with him.

The blood-bay seemed to know exactly where he wanted to go. Twice when she would have swung him on a trail that was other than his choosing, he took the bit and rebelled. Thereafter she let him pick the way. He went at a swinging gallop that brought the night air booming past her ears.

When she reached the lake she heard the dogs off to her right, and higher. The horse did not turn in the exact direction of the sound—he drove straight upward. She felt sure that he knew the direction the chase was leading and was shaping his course to intercept theirs.

They were high then, the trail clinging to the mountain side with a precarious dizziness. She could look down on some of the silvered lesser peaks, and the bay horse was forced to move at a more cautious gait. Twice he stopped and stood still as a graven image, not even breathing—listening. Each time he drove on upward with renewed eagerness.

They came to a place where the trail was but a notch in the solid rock wall. Below, an expanse of smooth rock dropped as steeply as a house roof. Above, was a short ledge, flat-topped. She knew that the slick rock on the lower side of the trail ended with a sheer drop into the river far below. She could even hear the faint *rush-rush* of the stream as it poured over the boulders in its bed.

The horse stopped midway of that precarious trail with a suddenness that pitched her roughly against the saddle horn. The wind flowed over the flat-topped ledge on their right with a steady pressure. A tremor ran through the horse and he snorted gustily.

Then almost over their heads they heard the dogs bay again, a savage exultation in the note, as if they were close on their quarry. A dark form shot over the ledge and landed squarely in the trail not six feet in front of the bay horse's blaring nostrils. His snort was a blast of utter terror, and he whirled with such frantic vehemence that he caught Hope entirely off balance.

She fell as he whirled, grasped wildly at the saddle horn but missed it! Her moccasined foot slipped through the stirrup loop—and her head struck the rocky ledge stunningly. The blow dazed her, yet she could feel the horse gathering him-

self for a wild dash away from the fearful thing which was crouched in the trail, so close and menacing.

As she hung there, suspended by the stirrup, she heard the dogs again, then she tried to swing upward and reach the horn. At the same time the horse leaped wildly forward and she was hurled back fiercely. Then dimly she heard a shouted command, and the horse stopped dead, trembling in every limb. A rifle spoke thunderously; spoke again and again, the echoes bounding from cliff to cliff, coming back in a jumble of mingled thunder.

THEN Rol Corby was taking her from her precarious position and speaking soothingly to the still trembling horse, who was muzzling at him with a frantic eagerness. On her own feet again, Hope could see the amazement in Rol's face, for up there the moon was as light as day.

"You foolish, foolish girl!" he said, but tenderly.

"Father's gone and I was lonesome," she told him simply. "Everything was so grand out, and when I heard your dogs I just had to come."

She could feel a little tremor in the arm that supported her, and she wondered if he could feel her trembling, too. "Besides," she said when he did not speak at once, "the horse wanted to come."

In the moonlight she could see his face fall. He looked first at the horse, still nuzzling him, then at her.

"Where did you get this horse?" he asked with disconcerning directness.

She shook her head. The moon light made magic in her hair. "Matt Girty brought him. Berry wouldn't let me ride him."

Her eyes fell upon the thing in the trail. The dogs were worrying it savagely. It was an inert thing now, but even though she knew its power to harm was forever gone, she suddenly felt faint, and swayed a little.

"Side down here a moment," his voice was tender with concern.

She allowed him to place her in a half reclining position, supported by the rocky wall. Then he spoke sharply to the dogs, stepped over the thing and bent over it a moment, a knife blade flashing in his hand.

She looked away a moment, and when she looked again he was coming towards her, the trail was empty and the dogs were pointing their noses down the steep expanse of rock that flanked the trail.

"Biggest cougar I ever saw," he told her, cheerfully. "You just happened to cross his trail. He was trying to get away. There's nothing in the world that horses are more afraid of."

"Why wouldn't they be?" she said, remembering their losses.

"Are you ready to go home?" he asked her.

She could look straight out over the valley from that position. The moonlight flooded it with a silver glory. Far below the elk bugled again, the note magically softened by distance.

"Not yet," she said softly.

Rol sat down beside her. "Tell me about yourself!" he said impetuously.

So she told him the simple facts of her simple life there. How she had never known a mother; how her father had brought her there when she was two years old.

"Now," she finished dismally, "father's going to send me away on a visit."

"Do you want to go?" he asked quickly.

She shook her head and little fires awoke in her hair. She could feel the tremor of his arm against her own and suddenly to look at him.

Quite suddenly Rol arose. "I reckon I'll be taking you home!" he said firmly.

With a child-like engagingness she held up her hands. "Help me," she said.

His own closed on them with a force that was delightfully painful. Then after she had gained her feet, he stood a moment holding her hands, looking into her face. She smiled a little and heard him catch his breath. Suddenly his arms were about her, and his lips on hers. Then he released her abruptly and stepped back.

"Sorry!" his voice was husky. "But I couldn't help it!"

"I'm glad you couldn't, Rol," she said softly.

He was silent a moment. When he spoke, his tone was almost angry. "I'm taking you home," he said.

IT WAS a silent ride home with the two great stag hounds trotting along behind as silently as wolves. But inside, Hope's heart was singing.

At the barn Rol unsaddled the bay horse and put him away. While she waited for him she could hear him talking to the horse, and heard the horse whinny after him when he came out. She remembered hearing her father say that you could safely trust the man that horses and dogs liked.

Rol came out and swung swiftly into the saddle. She stood close beside his stirrup, the moon fair in her face as she looked up at him.

"Good night," she said softly.

He sat very erect in the saddle, but looking down at her. He seemed very tall then. She waited.

"If I get shot for it!" he suddenly exclaimed, then bending swiftly, kissed her again, swung back and spurred his horse.

Hope stood there listening to the retreating roll of his horse's hoofs, watching him vanish in the moonlight. With her finger tips she touched her lips tenderly, where the pulse of his kiss still lingered. Inside the barn the blood bay neighed ringingly.

She was just turning towards the house when a shadow fell athwart the trail and an ungentle hand grasped her arm from behind.

"Hold on," it was Matt Girty's voice, and although she could not see his face she knew he was smirking as he spoke, "hold on baby-doll. Turn about is fair play, you know."

Hope stood perfectly motionless. She did not even turn her head. "Turn me loose, Matt Girty!" she strove valiantly to keep her voice steady.

Girty caught her other arm and turned her facing him, so that the moonlight fell upon her hair. He turned her with an effortless motion, and his hands were like two iron bands on her arms. His upper lip was drawn back so that she could see his crowded, uneven teeth; his eyes were slitted, but she could see the unclean light in them.

"Do you realize that I have only to call out to have you killed?" she asked. "My father would shoot you like a—a—"

"You won't call, and your old man wouldn't shoot *me* if you did," replied Girty, drawing her toward him with inexorable force. "Come on, gimme a kiss—"

Hope struggled to free her hands. Girty held her easily, and laughed as he drew her steadily closer. She could feel his fetid breath on her face. . . .

Then she felt Girty's hands torn rudely away and heard Berry Wingo's drawl.

"I reckon you're takin' too much privilege, Girty—keep yore hands still or I'll drill ye! Miss Hope, you can trot right on to the house anytime you git ready!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Rescue!

HOW she ever reached her room, Hope never knew, but she found herself

there, undressing with trembling fingers. Long after she had crept into bed she shivered with a mixture of harassing emotions.

Sunlight was pouring through her window when she awoke. By her bedside stood her father, looking down on her with a disquieting light in his eyes.

"Get up and get dressed," he told her. "The team is waiting now."

Hope knew that Matt Girty had been talking. But she affected surprise. "Team? Why, where are we going, father."

"I'm sending you to your aunt's down in Utah," he replied grimly. "They've wanted to adopt you for years. I've decided to allow it."

"I won't go!" she said flatly. "Father, I will not go!"

He leveled an accusing finger at her: "Where were you last night, girl?"

Hope confronted him proudly. "I'm eighteen years old. Old enough to know my own mind. Is it a sin to love a good man, father?"

"It's a sin and a burning disgrace to love a sneaking spy, hiding under an assumed name!" he thundered at her. "I would sooner see you planted under the pines out there!"

"I don't believe it!" she said flatly. "I don't—"

"You have ten minutes to get dressed!" he told her. "If you are not dressed then, I'll dress you myself and carry you down to the buckboard."

"Father, if I will agree—"

"There'll be no bargains!" he said shortly. "Be ready in ten minutes!" And with that he strode from the room.

HOPE sprang up and dressed. She knew it would be worse than useless to oppose her father—openly. And she knew she *had* to get word to Rol Corby.

She was downstairs before the ten minutes had elapsed, and her father was already in the seat of the buckboard. He swung the horses to cramp the wheel for her when he saw her come out on the porch.

"I must tell Berry good-bye," she called from the porch. "Where is he?"

Adair jerked his head towards the barn. "Hurry!" he said gruffly.

Hope ran for the barn, her short skirt, billowing above her knees. Berry was in the saddle room when she burst in upon him.

"Good-bye, Berry!" she said tearfully. "Father's sending me to my aunt's."

"Hell-fire, there's no call for that!" he muttered.

"Tell me, Berry, is Rol a spy?"

"Your daddy thinks he is."

"Berry," she was almost panting now, "I can't go away now. I can't! You know where the railroad curves in close to the mountains after it leaves town? Will you have a saddle horse for me there tonight, Berry? And flag the train? Will you?" she caught his jacket lapels and shook him.

"Why don't you ask me to do somethin' easy—like stoppin' the sun or the wind?" he asked humorously. "Yes, I'll do it if I git shot for it!"

She flung her arms about him and kissed him tumultuously. Then she ran out to the waiting buckboard and sprang into the seat. Her father gave the sorrels the rein and they lifted the front wheels of the buckboard from the ground with their first leap. Nathan Adair headed them towards the gap and drove with a recklessness that would have been alarming to any but a mountain-bred girl.

He brought her into town at sunset, a good hour before train time. The sun dropped down and the shadows merged into a solid blackness everywhere.

At length Nathan Adair spoke. "Daughter," his voice was husky with emotion, "don't think this is easy for me. All your

life I've fought against sending you away."

As Hope would have replied a faint whistle cleft the still night air. Far down the track she saw the single great eye of the locomotive swimming in the darkness. Then as the locomotive rushed by with its mighty thunder and shock, like a very little girl, she caught at her father's arm in sudden terror.

Nathan Adair lifted her to the first step of the day coach. He made a motion as though he would take her into his arms, then drew back.

"Tell your aunt—" he said huskily, then stopped, choked and turned away. She saw him stride back towards the buckboard a tragic, lone figure.

INSIDE the coach, guttering oil lamps threw a murky radiance on red-plush cushions. The window was so grimed with soot and coal dust that she could scarcely see through it. The moon was not yet up and the night was black as a wolf's throat.

Soon she got up and went unsteadily down the aisle to the open platform. Dust and cinders beat upon her and the swirling gusts of wind played havoc with her skirts. She was thankful for the concealing darkness.

As the train labored up the grade she tried to measure the speed. She wondered if she dared try to get down—if Berry would get there and if he would be successful in flagging the train.

She went down the first step, holding tightly, and tried to pierce the darkness.

Then a series of sharp, piercing whistles came back from the engine. She could feel the speed slacken. A man rushed out on the platform behind her and began turning the brake wheel madly. The scream of the shoes on the wheels drowned out other sounds. The train slowed, stopped.

She was off almost before motion ceased, and moving straight away from the train. Her eyes already accustomed to the darkness made out a dark blotch.

"Berry!" she called.

"Here, quick!" came a muffled reply.

The blotch moved. It was a horse, two—half a dozen horses.

"Why—what—?" she began.

Up towards the engine a fusillade of shots broke out.

"Berry—" she began again.

A powerful hand caught her right arm. Another hand clutched her dress over her breast and she found herself snatched from the ground and lifted to a position in front of the almost invisible rider.

"Berry is busy right now," said a voice directly from behind her. "Just sit tight a minute and we'll all be movin' away from here."

The very blood in Hope's veins seemed to congeal. That was Matt Girty's voice! Her body tensed convulsively, but Girty guessed that she was about to scream and his huge hand closed harshly over her mouth. She could feel him chuckling.

"Now, now!" he said chidingly. "That's no way to take it. After—"

Booted feet pounded towards them. There was a rattle of spurs, a rustle and slap of chaps and five dark forms congregated on the horses.

"Get it?" Girty's voice was sharp.

"Yeah. Heavy as hell. Want it behind your saddle?"

"I've got all my horse will pack," replied Girty. "Let Butch pack it. He's light."

Hope heard the men grunt as though lifting a heavy object. Saddle leather creaked and then as a series of wild whistles broke forth from the engine, the entire party got into motion. They rode deliberately.

HOPE knew when they struck the mountains. Girty who was leading, stopped there.

"You take the lead here, Butch," he said. "You know this damned trail and I don't."

Not until they reached the top of the climb did Hope realize where they were. There, an arch of rock under which they passed, told her that they were entering the valley by a pass high above the ranch house. She had been over it but once, in daylight, and that one experience had been enough. She knew, too, that the worst lay before them, on the way down.

Down they plunged. The horses slipped and snorted, but none fell. Hope waited until they were entering the most dangerous part of the descent. There the trail bent sharply, hanging on the very verge of a forty-foot drop while on the upper side a smooth wall of rock rose sheer.

The trail was steep there—dangerously steep. She reached up carefully and drew from her hat a six-inch hat pin. Then she felt her horse set his fore feet against the slope she reached down and stabbed his shoulder fiercely.

The animal's snort actually tore the night air apart, he lunged wildly, collided with the horse just ahead, lost his footing and fell thunderously.

Hope was hurled clear and fell so far that it seemed that she was going over the cliff. She fell at the very verge and catching a projecting rock, stayed the fall.

A moment of utmost confusion prevailed among the outlaws. She heard men shouting and cursing wildly. She heard one horse leave the trail, and scream as his feet encountered only space. The crash below was sickening.

Hope crouched in the little declivity at the verge of the drop and waited. She could always do one thing: she could throw herself off the cliff if any of them came close—

Above and around her the search began. Now and then a dislodged stone bounded past her to leap out into space, crashing eventually on the rocks forty feet below.

Suddenly she went tense. Somebody was coming directly towards her. This man was moving with utmost stealth and caution. Closer he came, closer; close enough until she could hear him breathing.

Her breathing stopped, so that she might hear better. All sound and movement of the man also stopped. Had he gone back?

Then something cold and clammy was thrust against her hand. Her heart leaped straight into her throat and only utter surprise kept her from loosing a wild scream. There was a rustle and a whimper and rough hair touched her face.

"Quiet, feller! *Hope!*"

Hope almost swooned, but from relief. "Here, Rol!" she whispered, faintly.

His hands found her quickly. A low growl emanated close beside her. She understood then how Rol had come to her so unerringly. The dog had found her for him.

"Quiet, boy!" Rol whispered sharply, then to her, "They're bringing up torches. We've got to get out of here before they do. I've got a rope. I hope it will reach the bottom. But if it don't, when you reach the end, just drop. It can't be far. Can you do that?"

"Yes!" she whispered.

"Put your feet in this loop—here," he groped for her feet. "Now take a good grip on the rope and I'll let you down."

Over she went. Rol paid out the rope swiftly. Down she went, bumping the face of the cliff rudely. Her descent slowed, stopped.

She let loose and dropped. There was a quick breath-taking rush, then she struck with stunning force. A brilliant light flared for an instant, then went out

and darkness, absolute and silent, followed.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Passing of an Outlaw

WHEN Hope opened her eyes she was lying on a bunk in a cabin. She could look straight out through the window and see the waters of the lake rippling and sparkling under the early morning sun. On the opposite wall hung two great cougar traps. She was alone in the cabin.

She sat up and swung her feet off the bunk. Her shoes and stockings had been removed. One ankle was swollen and it hurt when she put her weight upon it. There was a strong scent of liniment in the air. Rol had apparently been ministering to her injury.

The door opened and Rol stopped there, framed against the strong morning light, a bucket of water in his hand. His face lighted when he saw her sitting up. He put the bucket of water on a shelf and came towards her.

"I'm sure some glad to see you with your head up at last," he said. "I reckon I've used anyhow ten gallon of water on you."

"Not counting the liniment?" she laughed.

She could see that it pleased him to know she could still laugh. "How did we get away?" she asked.

"Why," he explained, "when I come down the rope I found you with a bumped head and a sprained ankle—that is I found the sprained ankle later. There's a short cut from that place where we went over the cliff to this cabin, so I took it. And here we are. How did you happen—"

"Tell me Rol," she interrupted, "are you a spy?"

"A spy!" he exclaimed. "No. What put that idea into your head?"

"Is your name Rol Corby?"

"No," he confessed, "it's Lundy," and when he saw her face cloud he continued quickly, "Marshal Lundy is my father, but I never came here to spy on your father, if that's what you're driving at. I come here on the trail of my horse—the one you rode that night—"

"It was only last night," she said softly. "Night before last now."

"Girty stole him. I'm a lion hunter. But I will admit that it was the horse I was after, mainly, at first."

"At first?" she said, meeting his look. "What later?"

Outside a dog growled warningly. Like a flash Rol's gun leaped into his hand and he was at the window.

"Your father is headed this way!" he exclaimed.

Forgetful of her injured foot Hope sprang to her feet and crossed to the window. Yes, it was her father, headed straight towards the cabin.

She turned to him, her eyes stark with terror.

"Hide, Rol, hide!" she whispered.

Rol's face set grimly. "For what? Pulling you out of the clutches of that damned Girty? I hide from no man!"

"Rol! He'll shoot you on sight if he finds you here with me! Rol, he knows you are the son of Marshal Lundy! He believes you a spy. For *my* sake, hide!"

Rol hesitated. "What will you tell him?"

"Leave that to me! But hurry!"

With a single stride Rol reached a wide board in the floor opposite the window. Raised it and exposed a cavity beneath. He leaped down and stood holding the board a moment with just his head above the floor.

"Remember, if anything happens I'm comin' out!" he warned her.

THE board dropped into place just as her father stepped into the doorway. The fierce expression on his face gave way to one of mute astonishment as she faced him.

"So!" He said it softly, but with savagery. His eyes roved about the cabin, his fingers tightened on his gun.

She went to him with a fearless, direct step. "Father, Matt Girty and his men held up the train and carried me off. I got away from them on the old trail, father. They held up the train and robbed it."

His eyes fastened on her. "Girl," he began, "I wish I could—"

Outside a dog growled again and Nathan Adair's horse nickered. There was an answering nicker. Adair spun about in the doorway. Looking past him Hope saw Matt Girty draw rein on the edge of the meadow that surrounded the cabin. Huge and powerful and evil he looked as he sat there staring towards them. Then out of the forest at his back rode four other men.

Hope knew they could not fail to see and recognize her father, standing there in the doorway. She saw Girty turn his head and speak to one of the men, then the entire group rode straight towards the cabin.

Without turning his head, her father spoke: "Get under cover, daughter!"

Hope knew then that she had regained, at least in part, her father's confidence.

"That horse, father," she whispered hurriedly. "The bay Girty is riding. That's Rol's horse. That's why he came here under an assumed name—searching for him—"

"Hide!" he whispered.

There was but one place in the cabin to hide—beneath the floor. She lifted the board and dropped. Down there she felt Rol's arms close about her, and his heart beating against hers. He whispered in the darkness:

"If you love me—"

Then as Girty's heavy foot shook the floor and his hearty voice roared out, she pushed Rol's lips away, gently.

Girty was speaking: "—come up to see if we finished our job? That rannie is one slick customer, Adair. We've been on his trail all night. Thought maybe we'd nail him here. . . . Seen his dogs outside. . . ."

Then her father's voice, sharp and abrupt as a pistol report cut in: "Girty, whose horse is that you're riding?"

There was a distinct pause. Hope could feel Rol's body tense against her. He made a motion as though he would rise and lift the board. But she held him tightly.

"Not yet! Not yet!" she whispered.

Then Girty laughed "Whose?" he boomed. "Why mine, Adair. You ain't gittin' squeamish about horse ownership, are you?"

"Girty," Hope could picture her father's narrowed, gleaming eyes, "Berry Wingo's down at the bunk house with a bullet hole through him that would kill most men. Who shot him, Girty?"

"Your spy," said Girty readily. "Berry—"

"The express was held up last night," her father went on mercilessly. "Did the spy do that? And did the spy carry my daughter off—"

Then Girty laughed loudly. "Boys," he chortled, "the old boy ain't as dumb as we figgered. We really ort to have dropped that gold bag. Well, I reckon this is as good a time as any to hand you—"

THE thunder of an explosion shook the cabin. Almost upon it was another and another. A man's high pitched yell of agony cut the air, a body thudded to the floor. Rol went straight up as though a powerful steel spring had uncoiled be-

neath him. The board flew towards the roof and Hope heard his gun crashing before she could arise.

When she looked out from the pit she saw her father stretched on the floor with two other figures. One of the men remaining on his feet had his hands clutched to his stomach and was turning around and around with a look of unutterable agony stamped on his face. He fell, as one of the remaining men leaped wildly through the door then there remained only Girty and Rol.

Girty's gun was empty. She saw him toss it disdainfully aside and advance on Rol with the stealthy step of a panther. His feline eyes were fixed on Rol and his were bared like an animal's.

Rol's voice cut the sudden silence clear and sharp.

"One more step, Girty and you'll get it—straight through your dirty heart!"

Girty snarled as he leaped. Rol's gun crashed once, then the two bodies came together with a shock that shook the building to the foundation.

Rol was hurled backward violently. Hope heard his head crack sickeningly against the bottom log of the wall. Saw his face whiten, his body go suddenly slack, as his gun flew from his hand and slid, spinning, straight towards her. Without removing her eyes from the two, she caught it.

Girty was shot mortally. She could hear his breath coming in gurgling gasps. But such was the tenacity of the man's vital forces that he would rend and kill until he could no longer move a finger. She saw his hands go out slowly and close on Rol's neck with fearful force. . . .

She put the bead of the gun in the exact middle of his bullet-like head and squeezed the trigger. She never felt or heard the gun go off, but she saw Girty start convulsively. Then she fainted.

* * *

ROL was bathing her face with water when she came to, and was saying over and over: "Are you all right . . .? Are you all right . . .?"

"My ankle is awful sore," she said.

The cabin had been cleared. But she saw a big man bending over the bunk on the opposite side and heard him say: "You'll live to pack a sight more lead than you're got now, Adair!"

"Where is my daughter?" her father asked. "Where is Hope?"

"My boy is takin' care of her, and don't worry, Adair. He'll do a proper job. He's a thorough pup."

There was a silence. Rol smiled at Hope. Then her father spoke again.

"Did you send your son in here to spy on me, Lundy?"

"I'll give you my word," replied the Marshal, "that I didn't know he was within a hundred miles of this place until five minutes ago."

"How many men did you bring in with you, Lundy?"

"None, Nath," said the marshal kindly. "I come to talk to you, not to fight you. I was hunting Girty, not you. An' besides I've got something to tell you about that trouble twenty years ago that sent you running. You goin' to listen?"

"I'll *have* to listen, I suppose," replied Nathan Adair. "But—" with a flash of his old fierceness—"that's not saying I'll believe what you tell me!"

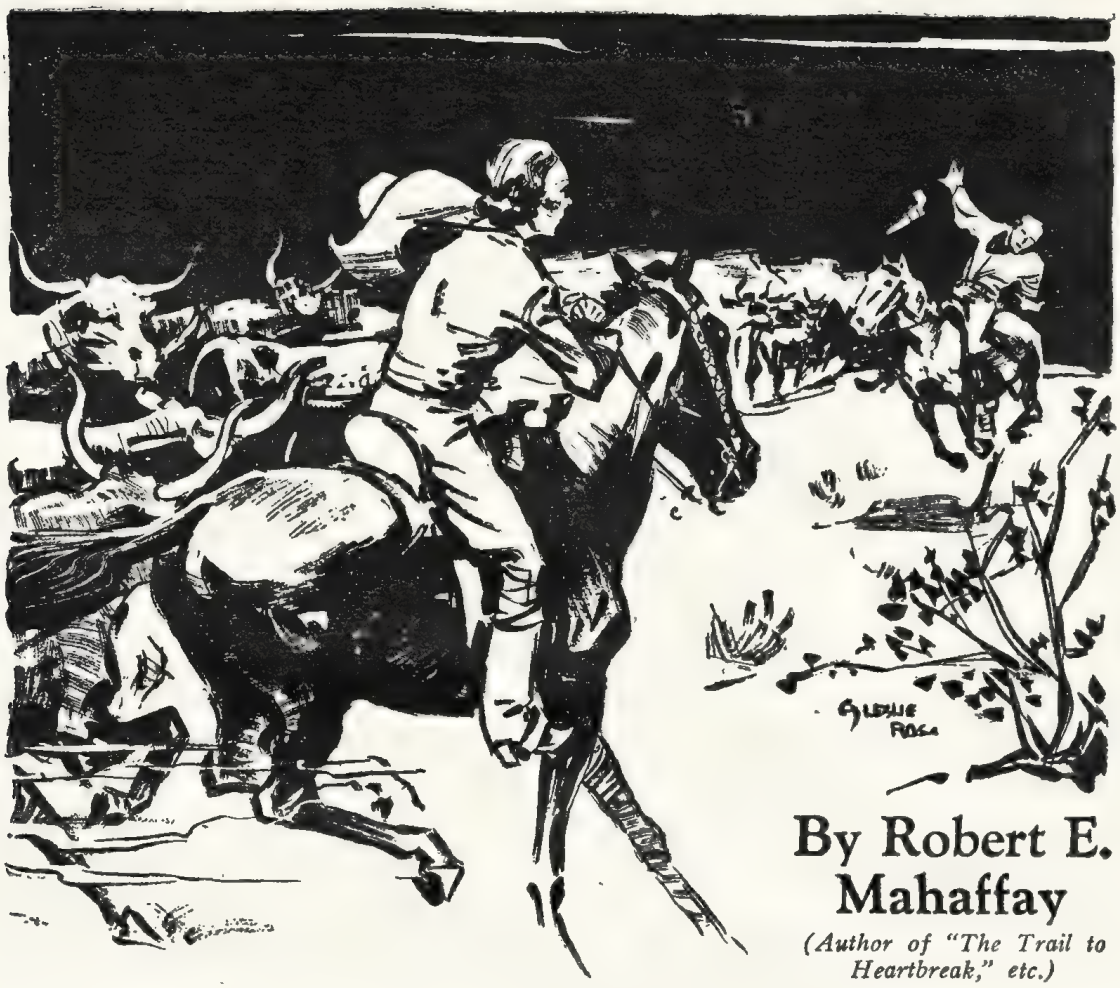
Hope looked up into Rol's face. Somehow she knew that the lawman had news for her father that would take away Adair's old bitterness. Those two, she felt would be friends.

And she and Rol—what she saw in his eyes made her turn her head shyly.

"Turn around here!" whispered Rol, "How am I to kiss you with your face turned away . . . ?"

THE END

HOMESTEAD GIRL



By Robert E. Mahaffay

(Author of "The Trail to Heartbreak," etc.)

She was afraid that someday they'd bring her young husband home dead. For he was wild and reckless—and she was so often alone!

JERRY WILSON'S head lifted suddenly as hoofs thumped a warning on the packed dirt outside. During the four years she had been married to Bill, that movement—a quick catching in her throat, a swift tensing of the muscles of her pliant body—had come to her instinctively. Yet now, though she was thinking of Bill she knew that this rider couldn't be her husband, for he had been away since dawn, riding the brakes in search of late-dropped calves which had escaped branding.

She moved to the doorway of the little homestead cabin of fir logs, stood there as the horseman loped up. Surprise in her clear blue eyes was followed by an unuttered question. From Bill's description she knew the man, though she had never seen him before. It was Wade Turk whose powerful Half-Moon outfit was spraddled across the opening of vast Grass-Bottom Valley, in the upper reaches of which Bill had settled. Jerry's husband had told her of this man whose bullet head was set on thick shoulders, whose curly spade beard sprouted from a rocky jaw.

"Wilson home?" he growled.

"No. He's in the hills," Jerry said.

"He must have been working the range that you rode through on your way here."

Turk fished a stubby cigar from his coat pocket and began to chew on it. "When he gets back tell him to clear out of here," he said abruptly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said." There was no doubt that Wade Turk meant it. "Clear out. I'm sick of these damned nesters cluttering the valley."

"You can't do that, Mister Turk," Jerry said with false courage. "We'll prove up on this place in the fall."

"No you won't. You won't be here."

The blue of Jerry's eyes went shades deeper. Out of their turbulent depths struck a keen anger. Jerry Wilson was capable of more than her husband—or those people who had shaken their heads over her going to Oregon—ever dreamed.

"I'll tell him," she blazed. "In the meantime take your own warning. Leave us alone or—or—"

"Maybe if any of these warnin's got my brand on 'em I better take chips myself," a voice drawled.

JERRY WILSON whirled around at the sound. She saw Bill pushing his lean, powerful frame out from the corner of the building with a swaying motion, as if he were balancing on a tight wire. He was wearing no gloves and his thumbs were hooked in his belt. He did not look at Jerry. His steady gaze was on Wade Turk. "Saw you headin' this way from the ridge yonder," he droned. "Thought I'd check up. Now what the hell is it you've got to say to me that you're afraid to spout when I'm handy?"

It seemed to Jerry that her heart would tear itself from her breast. She had heard Bill talk with that peculiar toneless resonance twice before. The first time was just before he climbed into the saddle of that man-killing thunderbolt, Black Danger,—the second was on the Trail when three desperadoes had threatened to plunder their scanty outfit. He had been nearly killed the first time, and had shot a man the second. Now. . . .

The cattleman chose to ignore Bill's insult. His grim features betrayed no expression. "Same thing I told your wife," he said coldly. "Haul your freight out of this valley. That goes as she lays."

Wade Turk jerked his pony around, and only the vicious jab of his spur rowels into the horse's ribs revealed what was seething in his mind. Bill shrugged his wide shoulders, squinted at the westering sun—and grinned. He turned on his heel toward the corral to put up his horse.

When he came back he was whistling. The warm touch of his lips when he kissed her did not reassure Jerry, and she scarcely heard him when he grumbled with mock ferosity, "No dinner? And me starving? Get the hind quarters of a beef in that frying pan."

"Bill, what was it?" she persisted.

"Oh, that?" Bill grinned. "Nothin' much. Turk an' me'll tangle some day and I'll have to knock his horns down for him."

He was evading something serious which lay beneath the surface. Jerry could tell that. His casualness sent a shaft of apprehension leaping through her. "Bill, what was it?" she persisted.

Bill leaned back in the rawhide-bottomed chair. It was that careless animal grace of his which had first drawn Jerry to him. It was what made him so terribly formidable. "I was kind of hoping I wouldn't have to tell you, honey. There's been talk, but I'd hoped it would blow over. We're squattin' on what Turk claims is his range, you know. It ain't, o' course. Accordin' to the homestead laws we got a right to it. Turk's been thinking all along that we'd go broke—all of us

nesters at this end of the valley. Well, he's caught on at last that we ain't goin' broke. Next fall we'll be in the clear. The bank loanin' us money on our cows was what tipped him off. Now he's startin' to r'ar back an' paw."

Jerry tried to keep her hand steady as she sliced potatoes into a kettle. "So what are you going to do?"

"Do?" Bill grunted. "Why we'll do whatever Turk wants. If he wants to talk, we'll talk; if it's a fight he's after, we'll feed him hot lead till he chokes."

THAT old fear, that aching in her throat, surged up in Jerry Wilson again. At times like this she didn't understand Bill. The streak of utter, disdainful recklessness in him startled her, tainted her consuming love for him with fear. For sometime, she thought, he would go too far and would came back to her only to be buried. . . .

Moving between the stove and the table, her mind fled back over the four years they had spent together. She had felt the full-throated roar of the brawling West in Kansas where the eastern end of the Overland Trail was rooted. She had seen the mass of eager humanity pouring along it, branching out against a crumbling frontier. The rugged men who plied their various trades back and forth along that trail carried with them an indefinable cloak of far-flung, magic lands. And Bill Wilson had been to Jerry the epitome of all that buoyant, boisterous recklessness. She had fallen hopelessly in love with him, and he with her.

For their honeymoon they had driven westward under the wind-whipped canvas top of a prairie schooner until they reached the Columbia River.

For all of her slender build, Jerry Wilson had done her share on that trek. Much of the time she had driven the oxen while Bill urged on their little herd of cows. More than once her weight was added to his against a badly mired wheel. The fire of longing for that new home they were going to had flowed in her veins, and when they found Grass Bottom Valley they settled there with their hopes raising high. Turk Wade, the first man into the territory, with more range than he could use, had submitted to their coming with disdainful aloofness.

All of that was not what bothered Jerry Wilson. She was too worried about Bill. Her early admiration for that devil-may-care recklessness of his had turned to dread. She was afraid of what might come of it. He loved her, but he was willing to risk his life as if it were no more than a straw tossed to vagrant winds. That smiling rashness, that indomitable fighting spirit Jerry Wilson could not comprehend.

To Jerry, besieged by a multitude of ranch chores, the summer dragged with a bitter dullness. Indirectly she caught snatches of the trouble which was beginning to roil the range. Bill grew taciturn, and his smile came less frequently. He told her bluntly one night that one of Wade Turk's riders had been shot to death at Crazy Springs, half a dozen miles to the east of them. Jerry was afraid that Bill had done it, though she did not ask him.

Unnamed terrors mounted in her each morning when Bill left, and the long hours before he returned were full of the agony of apprehension.

Often Bill would be away at night, too. "Keep the shade drawn and be ready to douse the light if anybody comes up," he told her brusquely. "No telling what they'll try."

"What is Turk doing?" she asked him.

"Nothing much yet. Trying to pick off some of the outlying boys." Grim lights had danced in Bill's eyes. "He's got a riding crew out, picking up loose

stock, whittling down the beef. First time we run onto 'em we'll stop that game."

More than once Jerry was tempted to beg him to leave the valley. There were other places they could go, and even though they might not be they would be safe. Yet something held her from doing it. During the past three years she had come to feel that this was their home.

Sometimes she would practice with the rifle Bill always left with her. It was too heavy for her, and the kick of the weapon bruised her shoulder badly, but she stayed with it. Bill grinned when he saw that blue hurt and told her to hold the butt of the rifle more tightly against it. She tried out the method he taught her. She would not admit even to herself that she was learning to kill humans.

ONE night in late August Jerry was alone in the house when four or five horsemen thudded off the trail and up to the front door-yard. Jerry cupped a hand over the lamp chimney, blew out the light. Then in the darkness she felt for the loaded rifle. The door was barred.

"You there, Wilson?" a voice called. "We want to talk to you, Wilson."

This was what Jerry had been expecting and dreading. Thank God, she thought, that Bill was not here. He would go out to them, ready to match his guns with theirs.

Jerry cocked the rifle. Her fingers felt very stiff.

The clicking was audible outside. "Come on out, Wilson," the voice taunted, "or we'll pump enough lead in you so they'll have to bury you where you fall."

Jerry pushed the rifle barrel through a loop-hole near the door. "Bill isn't here," she said. "If he were you'd have known about it before now."

"Takin' cover behind a woman's skirts, eh?" the voice sneered.

"No, by cripes," another man growled. "The filly's alone." He mumbled something and the rest laughed. "Open up, sister. This here is just a friendly call."

Jerry's finger tightened on the trigger. "Stay put!" she snapped. "First man out of his saddle won't climb back in it again. Now start moving!" She was startled at her own words. That was what Bill would have said.

"Reg'lar lead-slingin' hardcase, gents," a man chortled. Jerry saw a shadowy figure swinging down to the ground. She had never before in her life shot at a human being, but now a feeling of desperate intentness swept over her. The rifle roared, a wisp of acrid powder smoke stung Jerry's nostrils, and the man pulled himself back into the saddle, cursing at the pain of a bullet-raked leg.

The men held a muffled consultation, then swung around the cabin toward the corral. There were three horses there, all the Wilsons owned except for the mount Bill was riding. There were two loop-holes in the blank wall at the rear of the cabin covering the corral. Jerry went to these and sent two slugs whining over the heads of the trotting riders. They scattered. One of them shouted, "We'll be back later, sister." But they left the corral unmolested and rode off.

The rifle dropped out of Jerry's trembling fingers, clattering noisily on the floor. In the sickening reaction which followed she found time to wonder what had come over her. During that brief crisis she had been another woman.

She didn't tell Bill about it. She was afraid of what he might do.

Bill, when he came home later that night, had troubles of his own. He didn't even notice the rifle which Jerry had carefully cleaned. Worn out with hard riding, constant vigils and little sleep, he gulped hot coffee in his rawhide-bottomed chair, ran a brawny hand through his rumpled

black hair, talked more than he had talked to Jerry in a long while.

"Hell's faunching to break loose, kid," he told her. "Some one of the gents in our bunch has sold out to Turk, double-crossing us. Can't figger out who it is. Jeff Sykes was bringin' a wagon load of grub from Timberline. He was comin' at night and comin' careful, but they laid for him, wipin' him out. Turk's gun toters, I mean. Somebody tipped 'em off. That ain't the first thing that's happened like that." He frowned. "Damn Wade Turk. The bank's getting edgy. Turk threw a scare into 'em, I reckon. Turk's up to somethin', but I can't make out what." Bill got up and stretched wearily. "Well, let him try. We ain't asleep. If we can hold on till we get the beef sold in the fall, we'll be set."

AS the weeks toiled by, Jerry watched the plans of the nesters draw to a head. With the beef roundup completed, their steers were to be bunched for protection on the drive out of the valley. There were sixty three-year-olds in the Wilson herd, and Bill had thrown them into the fenced lower pasture while waiting for the others.

Jerry followed those preparations with a sinking heart. A terrific dread of the outcome of this thing weighed on her. Some obscure instinct warned her of nameless terrors to come. She could pin her fears on nothing definite; that was the horrible part of it.

Three days after the beef had been gathered Bill said tersely at supper, "We're runnin' the herd out tonight. If word hasn't slipped out we'll most likely make it without any trouble."

Jerry knew that he could not be turned from his plan and reconciled herself to it. But, along toward nine o'clock, when Bill struggled into his mackinaw and reached for his hat, a hard lump rose in her throat. She wanted to cry out, scream to him that he mustn't go, do anything to keep this man of hers from striding out into the shadow of death. For as surely as her love for him was like a knifing pain, she felt that he would never come back alive. Yet she did not speak, she could not, though that old burning fear lay in the misty depths of her blue eyes.

Bill kissed her, stood for a moment with his strong arms close around her. "What's the matter, kid?" he asked. "You been awful quiet lately. Scared?"

Jerry shook her head. "Not me, Bill. Get—get back as soon as you can."

Hoof beats thundered suddenly in the yard. They heard a rider fling himself from his horse, then someone was pounding at the door. "It's me, Bill—Dorgan," someone shouted.

Bill let his gun drop back into the holster. He swung down the cross bar of the door, pulled it open. The man, Dorgan, stood panting in the opening. Jerry knew him—a nester who had squatted in the Crazy Springs Basin. He was undersized, with a pinched, ferret-like face and colorless eyebrows. Jerry had disliked his whining, sly manner.

"Hell's to pay, Bill," he blurted frantically. "Turk ain't goin' to let them steers through."

"What makes you think that?"

"It's a fact," whined Dorgan, his eyes flicking restlessly about the cabin. "I come past his place from town. He's got a line of gunnies throwed across the mouth of the valley, knowin' damn' well it's the only way we can get our stuff out."

Bill Wilson's brown hand was clamped on the butt of his sixgun. "Damn Wade Turk!"

"I heard talk," Dorgan went rapidly on. "Turk's got it rigged up with the bank. He'll bottle the beef up so's we can't peddle it. Then when the bank takes over, he'll buy the herd back from them

an' leave us out in the cold. I shore wish I was fast enough to—" He left the rest unsaid. His eyes glittered as they fastened on Bill.

Jerry saw that look, read it truly. The other homesteaders knew the reckless, fighting stuff that Bill Wilson was made of. They would use him, let him bear the brunt of what was to come.

"Bill!" she cried. "You must not. . . ."

But he was not looking at her. He was staring past Dorgan into the night, a look of grim resolve moulded into his strong features. "Damn Turk," he repeated with that peculiar toneless resonance in his voice. "There's only one way to settle this. I'll get Turk. Clear him out of the way."

Dorgan leaned forward eagerly. "You goin'—you goin' now?"

"Yeah. Startin' now."

Dorgan scurried out of the door like an alarmed rat. They heard him hit leather; then the drive of his mount's hoofs thundered through the night. Jerry leaped forward and caught Bill's arm. She had seen something in Dorgan's restless eyes that Bill had missed—a furtive gleam that her intuition interpreted as danger. It was nothing she could explain.

"Bill, the cattle come first. Get them through first. After that—"

He shrugged roughly to free himself. "We can take 'em through at a walk," he jerked, "with Turk out of the way."

Wildly she tried another tack. "Don't do it, Bill. It'll be murder! Murder!"

"Murder for a damned good reason!" Bill snarled, and Jerry could see that he meant it with all the sincere force of his personality. . . .

THE next moment he was gone, and Jerry's eyes were blurring as they centered blankly on the bare surface of the closed door. She walked unseeingly to the chair that was Bill's and dropped into it. A sickening weakness took possession of her. Those vague horrors which had been tormenting her had become a ghastly reality. If Bill killed Wade Turk it would be murder. If he failed. . . ! The thought of life without Bill gashed her like repeated strokes of a knife.

The wick of the lamp on the table burned down, flickered out. The darkness which had been held at bay, rushed greedily into the little cabin as Jerry sat there motionless. How long she sat huddled with her eyes closed, her slim body inert and her mind whirling, she did not know.

She was roused not by the fact but by the dim memory of a horse's hoofs plodding sluggishly in front of the cabin. She stood up swiftly, wondering if she had heard it or if it were part of some fantastic dream. She had not barred the door and it was swinging open a few inches. Through that aperture she stared out. A star-decked night sky was visible and, bulking against it, was the faint outline of a horse and rider. They did not move. Jerry's hand lifted sharply to her throat. There was something extraordinarily eerie about the immobility, the utter silence of that horse and rider who might have been a haunting phantom from the dead. Then the mount pawed restlessly, tossed its head. The figure in the saddle slumped forward, and began to pitch out.

With a wild, ringing cry Jerry darted out, catching Bill's weight against her shoulder as he fell.

Perhaps, faced again with that problem of getting Bill inside and onto the bed, Jerry never could have accomplished it. But now she did it somehow, half dragging him, half supporting him. Panting, the muscles of her slender body aching, she knelt by the side of the bed in the guttering illumination from the lamp which she had lighted again. Bill's face was haggard and relaxed into an apalling peace. It's dead whiteness was accentuated

by a smear of blood that was caked on the right cheek.

He was breathing irregularly, as if there were an obstruction in his throat, and his lips, which no longer had any color, moved feebly in forming words too faint for the ear to catch.

Only for a moment did Jerry remain there on her knees, staring with dry and unbelieving eyes at her husband. The sight of Bill bleeding out his life, so sorely wounded that she did not know whether he would live or die, performed some alchemy in her soul. Moving with a crisp, emotionless efficiency, she kindled a fire for hot water, tore a clean underskirt into strips for bandages, began to cut the blood-sodden clothes from Bill's limp frame.

A bullet had torn through his side high up on the right, a second had broken his collar bone, and still another had slanted through his thigh and chipped the bone of his hip. Jerry stemmed the flow of blood, bathing the wounds as best she could and binding them.

When it was done she felt strangely that she should have been crying. There was a dull ache in her breast, but there were no tears. Another emotion was struggling in her, beginning to overwhelm her consciousness with its molten fierceness.

She leaned down suddenly and kissed Bill with that burning tenderness of a mother who may never see her child alive again. That old fear which had gnawed at her so remorselessly was gone entirely. The worst had happened, and her dread of it had left her. She must do now what Bill would have done. It meant their home, the home Bill had been so recklessly willing to fight for. . . .

Bill's eyelids fluttered; his gaze groped for her. He whispered hoarsely, "Them steers—kid. They got to— They got to—"

The movements Jerry Wilson made then were precise and cool, in amazing contrast to the leaping fire in her brain. Slipping out of her skirt she pulled on a pair of Bill's levis, rolling them up at the bottoms. She tried to buckle Bill's cartridge belt and holster about her waist but found that she was too slim for it, and had to gouge new holes in the leather with a kitchen knife.

At the door she stopped for a last look back, and for an instant the agony of her love for Bill broke through her desperation. But Bill would have gone out tonight to do what she was going to do. He couldn't now. So she must take his place.

THE fall night was cold and seemed unusually dark. Jerry got the saddle on her pony, put her foot against the beast's ribs as she pulled up the cinch. Then she rode down to the lower pasture and opened the gate.

Jerry had handled cattle before, very often during the past year when Bill had been so busy. Careful not to alarm them unduly, she got them to their feet and began to push the herd out of the pasture and to the southward. Where Bill was to have met the rest of the nesters she didn't know. That thought occurred to her only fleetingly. She knew only that those sixty Wilson steers must go out of Grass-Bottom Valley.

An hour fled by. Then she heard a voice calling softly. Horsemen loomed in the encircling blackness. Jerry fell back from the herd, pulling out the heavy sixgun and holding it across the pommel. She recognized Boone, behind him, Lutz, and then the under-sized Dorgan.

Boone peered at her in the gloom. "My God, it's Miz Wilson. What you doin' out here?"

"Bill's hurt," she said. "I'm taking the herd out."

Boone shook his head and growled. "You can't do that. We ain't none of us goin'. Dorgan here brought word that Turk's got a pack of gun-throwers strung across the gap."

Anger made Jerry's words curt. "If we can't get our stuff out we'll all go to hell. We might as well go fighting."

"Not me!" Lutz said. "I'd rather go broke than pass out with hot lead in my belly. Take your stuff back, girl. We're all waitin' till this mess clears up."

"I'm not," Jerry snapped. "There's only one way to clear it up." She pulled her pony around, spurred hard.

Boone lunged at her, a hand gripping her bridle. "You're crazy, kid. You can't do it."

Again Jerry's movements were coldly calculated while her brain was aflame with turbulent recklessness. Her gun swung in a half circle, centering on Boone's midriff. He saw the glint of it and gaped. "Drop it," she snapped. "You can't stop me, you or anyone else. If our herds don't go through tonight they never will."

Boone swore hardily. Jerry could hear his jaws click together. "Maybe you're right," he grunted after a silence. "I know one thing—you ain't hittin' the gap alone. I'll be with you, an' so will the rest."

"By God, I won't," cried Dorgan.

Boone whirled on him, his Colts flicking out, boring at the shifty-eyed nester. "You sure as hell will, mister. 'Pears to me you've been awful blamed anxious to go broke. Too damned anxious. You're ridin' into that fight, an' you're ridin' into it ahead of me." His tone was different when he spoke to Jerry again. "Lutz will give you a hand here, Miz Wilson. We're holding our herd about a mile yonder. We'll throw 'em together an' make the run. Keep back, kid, keep back when we hit Turk's line."

THE events which transpired during the remainder of that night passed in a fevered blur before Jerry's vision. There were no more than two hundred and fifty beef steers in the combined herds, but in the shifting darkness their weaving shoulders and tossing horns seemed to stretch away before her endlessly. She was plodding along in the choking curtain of dust that puffed up unseen from the many cloven hoofs. The grim thrill of that perilous night drive caught her up, chopping her breath into short gasps, tensing her slim muscles till she thought they would snap.

Then the strained hush exploded sharply. Somewhere ahead of them a sixgun barked, and Boone's voice rose in a bellow. "Start the critters! Stampede 'em. Don't let 'em turn. Don't let 'em turn!"

Automatically Jerry was shouting, shooting into the dirt at the heels of the drags. Other voices bawled hoarsely beside her. The raucous cannonading of sixguns thundered in her ears. The herd shivered visibly, slowed, poised, and after the fraction of a second which seemed interminable bolted ahead in mad panic. The crackle of shots faded away in the mounting blast of their rumbling hoofs.

Now Jerry was riding alongside, crouching low, so close that the wildly stabbing horns threatened her mount's ribs. Jets of flame were spouting in the darkness ahead of them. Vaguely she could hear Boone shouting orders. . . .

The whole thing became a ghastly nightmare, brittle with ear-shattering sound, vivid with fantastic, unbelievable images that were hurtling into a wall of blackness, a gaping void slashed by spear heads of flame.

Tears caused by the rush of air streamed down Jerry's cheeks. As she wiped them away her hands grew wet and she fumbled with the sixgun. It grew

very heavy and awkward. There were bullets left in it, but she couldn't fire them. Finally she dropped the gun and clung with both hands to the horn. The gruelling strain of the thing, beginning with this mad, frantic charge, had sapped her strength. Her body seemed frightfully weak, incapable of remaining erect in the saddle. There were more shots, but she did not hear them for she was now concentrating with all of her worn-out energy on the task of keeping herself from being plunged down under those chopping hoofs of the herd.

Then a high shelf of rock crowned by stunted pines which were limned against a lightening sky drifted past. Behind them the shooting dwindled and died out—and Jerry knew that they were through the gap. She cried out in joy as the exhausted herd slowed in the dawn that came bursting over the distant peaks. And then thinking that her job was over she let her mind and body drift into blankness. . . .

BETWEEN them, Boone and Lutz got Jerry down from her saddle. They stretched her out there in the grass, watched over her until her eyes opened hours later. When she finally came to the sun had climbed to a point directly above her. She could see Boone, walking toward her with a hatful of water. He grunted and his bearded face split in a grin. "Thank God you ain't dead," he growled.

Jerry struggled up. She could see the herd, gaunted but safe, straggling over the little basin. Her eyes studied Boone's ruddy, honest face. "Was—was anybody hurt?"

Boone shuffled uncomfortably. "Some of the boys got hit. Only one got killed." His glance darted to her and away again. "Dorgan. He—he got ideas on the way through. Figgered he'd turn the herd back. Seems he was the gent workin' in cahoots with Turk."

Apprehension leaped into Jerry's mind. "What about Turk?"

"Funny about him," chuckled Boone. "He come ridin' down here just an hour ago, with his gun crew behind him. Seen you layin' out here; thought mebbe one of his men had done for you. Then I told him what happened last night—up in the valley. He swore some, but he called his gunnies off an' said he reckoned he didn't need the upper part of the valley anyhow—which he don't."

"But Bill tried to kill Turk," Jerry cried. "That's how he got hurt. I thought—"

Boone shook his head. "Don't know nothin' about that. We're plannin' to hold the herd here a week or so, fatten 'em up again. If you figger you can top a hoss, I'll take you back to the cabin."

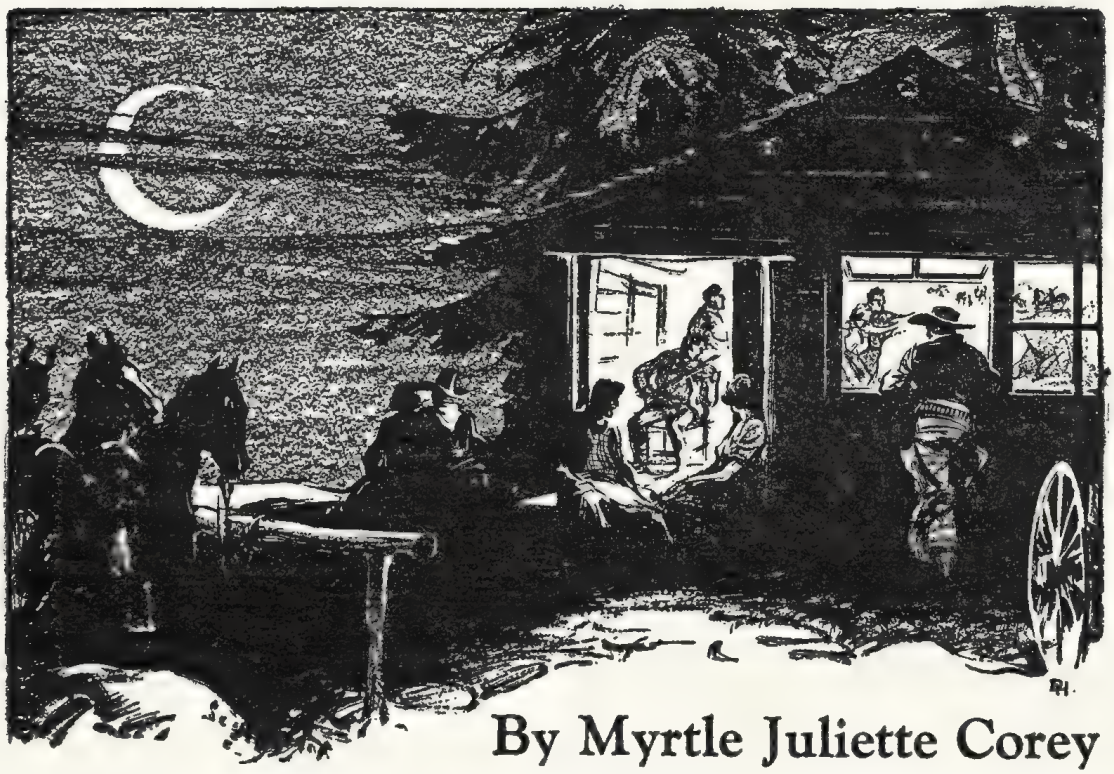
From Bill himself, weak but his old cheerful self, Jerry got the story. Dorgan, after goading Bill into heading for Wade Turk's, had raced on ahead and ambushed him, guessing shrewdly that with Bill out of the way the nesters would be at a loss. Bill had recognized him before Dorgan's bullets drove into him. What arrangement Dorgan had with Turk, what recompense he was to receive, no one would know, for Dorgan was dead.

Bill listened to Boone's story, and when it was finished his fingers clutched Jerry's hand fiercely. "You scare me, kid," he complained. "I'll be scared now every time I look at you."

Jerry smiled as she leaned over and kissed him—kissed Bill who was going to live, and against whom there would be no charge of murder. *"I'm not scared*—any more," she whispered.

A Thrilling Rangeland Romance Novelette by Robert E. Mahaffay in the December Issue —Out October 13th!

FRONTIER FROLICS



By Myrtle Juliette Corey

STATELY cottonwoods, graceful, aromatic pines, tall "quakies" with slender, round spires reaching skyward—these trees keep certain occasions ever green in happy memory. Whether you have attended—or have merely heard about—a log house "raising" you will know that it was a high spot in pioneer life. These were gay bits of embroidery set in the epic tapestry of our western frontier history.

Nor are these gala occasions entirely a matter of memory. In some spots they still occur, still hold the interest of yesteryear. Not only are they practical events, but they are also social get-togethers hard to beat. Even today, you may find outlying districts in our country where modern carpentry and "boughten fixins" have not replaced the work of hands with materials freshly supplied by nature. Land is still homesteaded, and log cabins are still used on many a summer cow camp.

You who live in towering apartment houses or in strictly modern bungalows erected by skilled artisans cannot estimate the thrill of watching your own home "raised"—of counting the growth, log by log, as your friends and neighbors or husband or sweetheart lay each carefully chosen and trimmed tree trunk in place.

Full many a Barbara, or Rosie, or Ann recalls the day when Johnny, or Dick or Tom rode long miles to whisper proudly in her ear:

"Getting the logs out for our house—and the boys'll help me raise it early in May!" His eyes were eager, ardent, while hers were shy, a blush stealing into her cheek. That meant—soon afterwards would be the wedding! In some cases, that came first and the young pair lived with their folks until the cabin was built. This anticipation held as great a thrill for it meant their own hearthstone, the roof under which their particular lives would develop.

The men would appear early, on the great day. Some because they relived in memory the building of their own cabins, others in the joy of that anticipation, but all for friendship.

Later the women and children arrived, some on horseback, others in buckboards, laden with food. A campfire would be kindled, and each woman or girl would present her special dish. Maybe it was chocolate cake, or dried-apple pie made from grandmother's recipe, or golden crusted bread, or steaming hot Dutch oven

biscuits. The picnic meal would be a feast to stir the envy of an epicure.

This was the opportunity for the little bride-to-be to display some certain culinary accomplishment. Here and there would be heard a remark, "Abby made that herself—isn't Charlie the lucky fellow!"

When these words came to Charley's ear, his chest would expand with pride as he hoped that the other fellows took notice. Young husbands experienced similar pride in the accomplishments of their wives, while the girl who was not yet bespoken, hoped that the young cowboy on whom her bright eyes were set, would see what a marvelous cook *she* was.

While the men worked, the women found time for the rare exchange of neighborhood gossip, for the trading of recipes and dress patterns. There were whispered confidences between the girls—and always the quick glances back and forth between young men and maids, those wordless messages that set pulses fluttering and blushes rising in soft cheeks.

Billy or Peter was never too busy to be conscious that Betty was near—her blue eyes a-shine every time they met his gaze. And, when the day's work was done, came the climax of enjoyment—the time when youth met youth in happy companionship. No cowpuncher remembered, then, that he had been lifting logs and working afoot all day, when he could ride home with *the* girl. Not a twinge of weariness detracted from the glamor of the moonlight or from the more subtle appeal of paler starlight, with long, shadowy stretches when *she* was glad to have him ride close at her side, probably with his arm about her lissome waist.

Or, perhaps it was a case of sharing the back seat of a buckboard, when not even the jolting destroyed the magic sweetness of a kiss stolen when the ones in front "weren't looking!"

Old timers will sigh. Why aren't there more of such good times nowadays? What has modern youth that holds a more poignant happiness than a real "Raisin' Bee"? What young husband of today can find joy as deep and personal in leading his bride into an up-to-date apartment, as the pioneer youth had in rearing the walls of their mutual home, while the girl looked on—then afterwards lifting her over the threshold that could never be to anyone else in the world what it was to themselves?

So—cottonwood, pine and quaking asp—each tree inspires the dearest of memories, represents the perfect culmination of all true romance—the snug, picturesque log cabin homes that were raised on our Frontier.

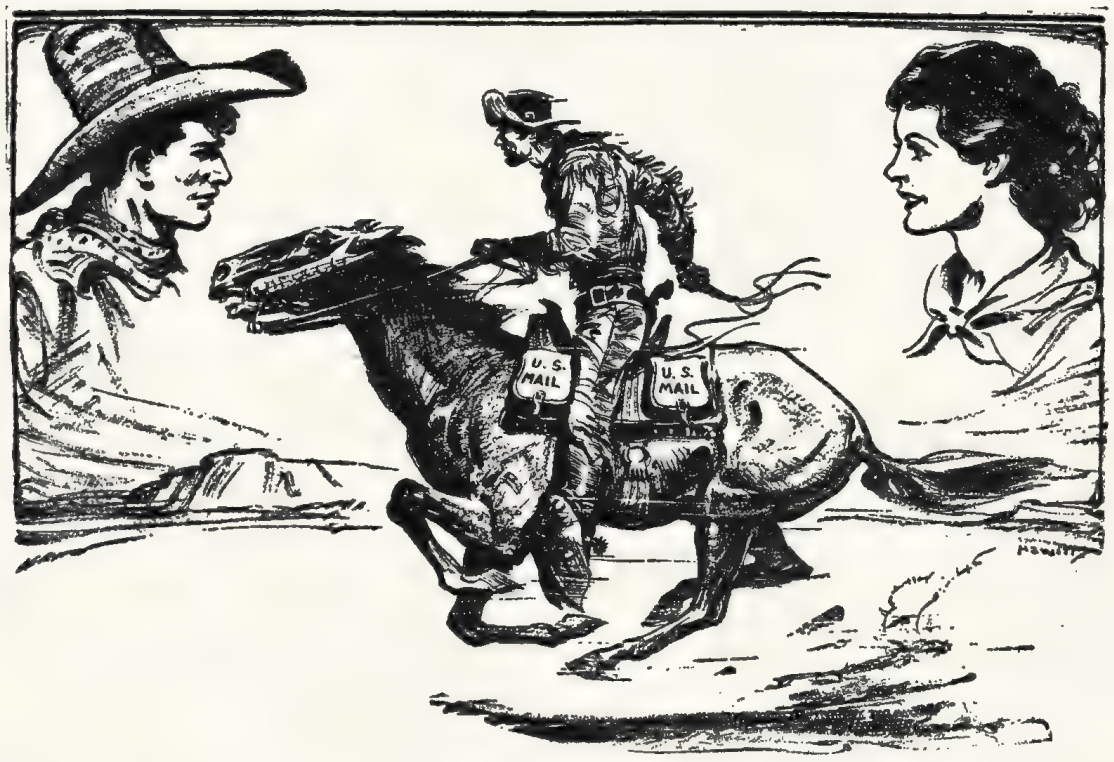
Next Month

Stories of Love and Adventure in the Glamorous West

By

Robert E. Mahaffay
Gunnison Steele
Robert Enders Allen
And Others

In the December Issue — Published Oct. 18th!



THE PONY EXPRESS

THE Pony is kept pretty busy these cool fall days carrying letters all over the country. Maybe he's getting ready for the winter, when the snow is drifted deep and the evenings are long and full of time for letter reading and writing. The Pony has to plan things a long time ahead because he has so much ground to cover. So be patient with him. If you have written in and your letter is among the missing don't get discouraged. It will be printed soon.

The first one this month is from a girl who is sweet sixteen and ready to be written to:

Dear Editor:

Could your Pony pick up one more letter? I have read many of your magazines and I think they are swell. I have one main aim in life and that is to own a ranch in one of the northern states. I would like to write to cowboys. I love horses and hope to become a cowgirl.

Won't some of you write to a girl just sweet sixteen out in California?

Dorothy Bradley,
137 Commercial Street,
San Dimas, California.

A little girl in England wants cowboy friends.

Dear Sir:

I am writing you in the hope of seeing this letter in your magazine. I should like to correspond with a young fellow about my own age—twenty to twenty-four. I'll be twenty in February.

I'm a lonely English girl, five feet nine inches tall, with blue eyes, fair hair and a happy disposition. I am willing to exchange photos of myself and news of London.

Yours sincerely,
Miss P. Gibson,
93 Windmill Lane,
Greenford, Middlesex.
England.

From Nome to Valparaiso.

Dear Postmaster (or Mistress):

Please stick my notice for a few pen pals on the bulletin board of the *Pony Express*. I am at present stuck out here in the middle of the Cleveland National Forest and would like some correspondents to keep me from complete ennui.

Thirty summers (I didn't notice the winters) have passed over my head or maybe I passed them. Anyway I am five foot ten, weigh one hundred seventy pounds, have blue eyes and light brown hair. I have had a university degree conferred upon me but it doesn't seem to have helped much. I have traveled all over the Americas, from Nome to Valparaiso and from Buenos Aires to Halifax and inland. Did you know there is a

Los Angeles in Chile? And that the Panama Canal runs more north and south than east and west and that its western end is in the Atlantic Ocean?

I have done a little bit of everything, been a little bit of everything and seen a little bit of most everything. If I've missed anything I'll be back later to pick it up. Any and all who will write will receive the benefit of my most earnest endeavor to entertain them. I am something of an amateur photographer and will be glad to send some interesting snaps and exchange photos. I have Mines and Red Cross First Aid certificates, have had parts of medical, theological, chemical and engineering courses, have a B. B. A. degree, etc., etc., being what would probably be termed a "jack of all trades but master of practically none." Notwithstanding all this I will nevertheless answer all letters. May they be many. Thanking you for your courtesy I am,

Sincerely yours,
J. Douglas Russell,
Box 116,
Ramona, Calif.

Is Texas like the stories?

Dear Editor:

I'm a farm girl, with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and am nineteen years old. My favorite hobbies are reading, dancing, and going to the movies. I have always wanted to ride a horse but could never get up enough nerve to get on one.

I would like letters from all over, but especially from cowboys and cowgirls. I have wanted to go to Texas and see the ranches and people, as I always wondered if it is at all like the stories.

As ever,
Ellen E. Gray,
Route No. 3, Box 50B,
Greenwood, Miss.

Her eyes are green—but not with envy.

Dear Editor:

I have been a regular reader of *Rangeland Romances* from the very first issue. My favorite authors are Cliff Farrell, Jack Bechdolt, and the authoress Marguerite Ratcliffe.

I am eighteen years of age, have dark brown hair and green eyes. I'm about five feet three and one-half inches tall and weigh one hundred and twenty-three pounds. Have studied Spanish and French. My hobbies are conducting a movie fan club, writing stories, and reading. Like to dance, swim, skate and lots of other sports. I have lots of time to write. I prefer those interested in my hobbies, but all are welcome.

Let's keep the postman busy, eh?

Sincerely,
Margaret Carpenter,
1012 West 5th Avenue,
Lancaster, Ohio.

JUNE BILEK wants only cowgirls to write to her. She is seventeen and lonesome, and is not interested at all in men!—2157 W. Culberton St., Chicago, Ill.

EARL SHELDON, a young soldier of twenty-five, wants to hear from western girls.—Drawer G, Station A, Hartford, Conn.

JOHN CADE hopes the Pony isn't already overloaded. He wants to hear from pen pals all over the world.—3520 Armitage Ave., Chicago, Ill.

HAROLD PETROCY is sixteen years old, has brown hair and brown eyes, and is overwhelmed with a yen to write to all sorts of people.—182 Freeman St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

JOSEPHINE TURICH, seventeen, is not so bad looking, she says. Horseback riding, swimming, dancing are her favorite activities. She likes westerners.—325 S. Millvale Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa.

DAVID BURNS likes to bust broncs and write letters. He reads every story in *Rangeland Romances* two or three times. But he still has time to write.—Rural Route No. 5, Richmond, Ky.

ROY EDWARDS is hunting for pen pards from all over the country.—44 Exchange St., Worcester, Mass.

ALMA ROSS is a little girl eighteen years old who was blessed with blue eyes and brown hair. She wants the cowboys to hurry up and write to her.—515 N. R. R. Ave., Salisbury, N. C.

CHESTER TOLLIVER, of the feudist Tollivers, wants more pen pals and less feuds.—345 Donnaldson Ave., Columbus, Ohio.

CHARLES W. BUCHANAN stays up until one o'clock reading *Rangeland Romances*. He is thirty-five and single, and often feels lonesome.—44 Exchange St., Worcester, Mass.

ELMO STACY thinks that we should print more stories written from the men's point of view. Men, he says, fall in love the same as women. He is fourteen years old, lives on a ranch, and wants to hear from all sorts of folks about his own age.—Box 587, Mason City, Wash.

DONALD UNDERWOOD says it always rains in Florida. That, he finds, is dull. So how about dropping him a note in a waterproof envelope. He'll answer it.—436 East Duval St., Jacksonville, Fla.

ZORA BRADSHAW, a little suthun gal, wants pals about her own age. That is fifteen. She is five feet four, weighs one hundred and fourteen, has dark brown hair, brown eyes—and is always ready for fun.—Route No. 1, Maiden, N. C.

DONALD FRIEND writes: "Wanted, pen pals whose interests are like mine. Am age twenty three, interested in learning how to write. Like modernistic houses, stream-lined cars, *Rangeland Romances*, and people who like to write letters.—Pindell, Md.

(For additional Pony Express, please turn back to page 6)

THE OPEN ROAD

OUT THERE in that part of Montana where the Powder River flows into the muddy Missouri they still tell the story of Al Simpson and his wife. He tells the story on himself just about as often as anyone else.

They were young and full of dreams and ambition and energy. They built their house themselves and settled down to raise cows and children. But their ranch didn't grow very fast. . . . so when Red Curley began to harrass the neighborhood, Al Simpson welcomed the chance to have a little fun chasing the badman. He saw that Lucy didn't want him to go. So he had to make up an excuse.

"It's my duty," he said. "I gotta do it. I gotta go with the posse and ride. Maybe sleep on the wet ground. Maybe not sleep at all. But I won't get hurt—an' you'll be safe here. Just keep yore shotgun loaded—for varmints!"

Lucy kissed him goodbye, and there were tears in her eyes when he rode away with his six-shooter in his waistband and a spare pair of socks in his slicker roll.

It was three days later when Al came back, haggard, weary and dirty.

"We didn't find him," he said. "He's pretty smart. I sure envied you here, all nice an' snug. Anythin' happen?"

"No, nothing," Lucy shook her head. She cooked up a fine meal for Al, and when he was through he got up and started to leave.

"Red Curley's chousin' around here somewhere," he said. "We gotta get goin' again. This shore is a hard life. But there's no way out of it. Keep that shotgun handy."

"I'm not forgetting the shotgun," she said. "But, before you go chasin' badmen all over the country you better get me some more shells. There were only two in the house."

"Gosh," Al sighed. "I shouldn't take the time for that. But I guess there won't be any more varmints bother you. I'll only be gone a couple of days, anyway."

He was already in the saddle when she tugged at his sleeve.

"Can't yuh bury the varmint I *did* catch?" she asked him. "It'll only take you a minute. An', anyway, you should get a fresh horse."

He got down again and gave his wife a big hug. "I didn't think of getting a fresh horse," he admitted. "What you get with that shotgun? A porkie or a skunk?"

"It's in the barn," she said.

Then she waited there at the doorway of the little log house while her big husband went to the barn to do this one chore for her. Her eyes were sparkling with merriment when he came running out again.

"Good God! Red Curley! He hurt yuh? Who shot him?"

"He didn't get a chance," Lucy told Al. "He started actin' up so I remembered what you said about varmints."

Red Curley had come to get a fresh horse and she'd tried to keep him from taking it. He got pretty mean and she'd had to shoot him or get shot, herself.

There was nothing to it, she said. That last is what used to put Al in fighting temper. But now he likes to tell it on himself. And always he adds: "Can you imagine that! When I come back she says there ain't nothin' happened!"

If it does, do something about it! Get a raise in salary—but first get the training that will entitle you to this raise. Thousands of men in the same fix as you have gotten this training by spare-time study of an I. C. S. Course. Mail the coupon today!

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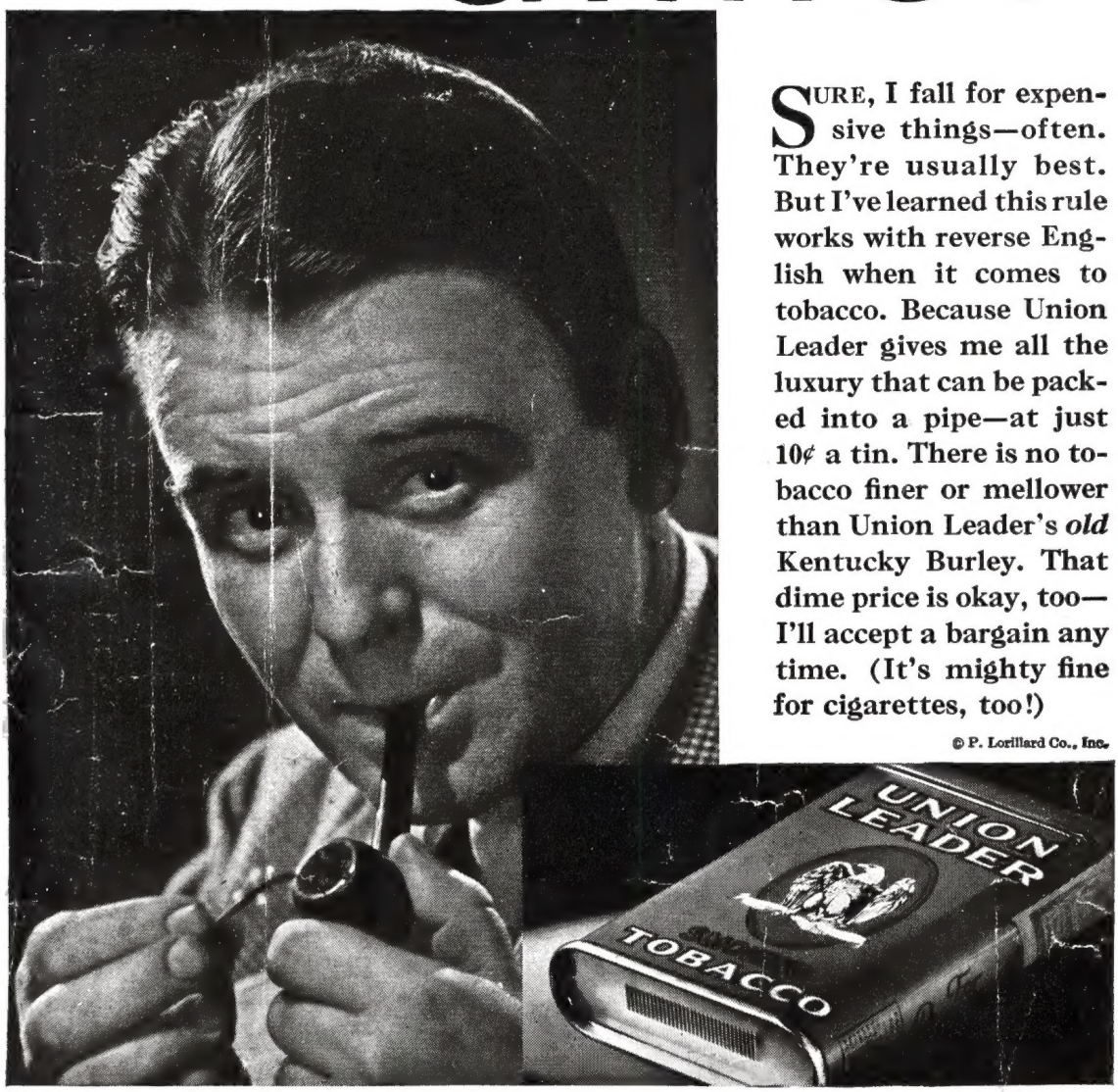

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